

JERRY SEINFELD ON HIS POP-TARTS MOVIE

EMPIRE

MAY
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CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Hayley Campbell, Ian Freer, Boyd Hilton, Dan Jolin, Bill McConkey, Ian Nathan, Christina Newland, Kim Newman, Nev Pierce, Paul Shipper, Adam Smith, Aron Warmann

CONTRIBUTORS

Words: Alex Arvid, Catherine Bray, Kambole Campbell, Jake Cunningham, Tom Ellen, Alex Garland, Katie Goh, Al Horner, Michael Jones, Matt Kamary, Jordan King, Barry Levitt, Victoria Luford, Tshepo Mokoena, David Ople, Priscilla Page, Olly Richards, Arjun Sajib, Sam Summers, Laura Venning
Photographers: Marco Vittur
Illustrations: Arn0, Matthew Brazier, Selman Hosgor, Bill McConkey, Russell Moorcroft, The Red Dress
Design: Russell Moorcroft
Subbing: Julie Emery, Lucy Williams

PRODUCTION

Print Production Controller
Carl Lawrence 01733-468858
Ad Production Controller
Jackie Doran 01733-468107
ePublishing Production Director
Alan Kindell 020-7859 8604

ADVERTISING

Head Of Magazine Media
Clare Chamberlain
Head Of Magazine Brands
Anu Short
MD — Bauer Media Advertising
Simon Kilby
Commercial Director —
Entertainment
Gemma Dick
Brand Director
Joel Stephan 020 3879 2125
Head Of Film
Sarah Clarke 020 7295 3576
Head Of Magazines — Regional
Katie Kendall 020 7295 8560
Media Planner
Ricky Duff 01733 649062
Head Of Classified
Imogen Jackaman 01733 459278
Inserts Manager
Simon Buckenham 020 7075 0812

MARKETING

Senior Marketing Manager
Susan Litawski
Product Marketing Manager
Madeleine Munro-Hall

H BAUER PUBLISHING

CEO of Bauer Publishing UK
Chris Duncan
EA to CEO **Vicky Meadows**
EA to CFO **Stacey Thomas**
Group MD — Lifestyle & Entertainment
Helen Morris
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Managing Editor — Mass & Celebrity Brands
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BACK IN 2015, when *Mad Max: Fury Road* first revved its thunderous engine and stormed into cinemas, I headed to the Curzon Soho to luxuriate in George Miller's masterpiece for a third time. Cut to five minutes into the film. Max has gobbled a mutant gecko. He's been branded and forcibly tattooed. A legion of pasty-white, hideously scarred, Gollum-y War Boys have leered, shrieked and cavorted. Suddenly, the middle-aged man next to me stands up and in a booming voice declares three words to the auditorium at large: "NOT FOR ME." Then he scurries down the aisle and flees the building.

His loss. The world of *Mad Max* might not be for everybody, but frankly that's why it's so much fun to visit. Outrageous, lurid, gory, deliriously paced and seemingly unfettered by a single studio note, *Fury Road* was a straight-up instant action classic. So much so that in our March 2020 issue, you guys voted it the greatest movie of the 21st century so far. (Let's face it, *Paddington* didn't have a single chainsaw berserker on a pole.) And now, incredibly, the 79-year-old Miller is at it again. *Furiosa* is another desert epic, this time with Anya Taylor-Joy duking it out against Chris Hemsworth. There will be monster trucks. There will be mayhem. I highly doubt there will be anything mediocre. Read all about it from page 52, in our world-exclusive report by *Empire's* very own Dementus, Chris Hewitt.

And because the landscape of cinema is as wild and unpredictable as the Wasteland itself, this issue also features the very first



interview with Jerry Seinfeld about his new Pop-Tart movie. Yes, the Pop-Tart, that unlikely of muses. At least it's tastier than a gecko.

Enjoy the issue.



Nick
NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
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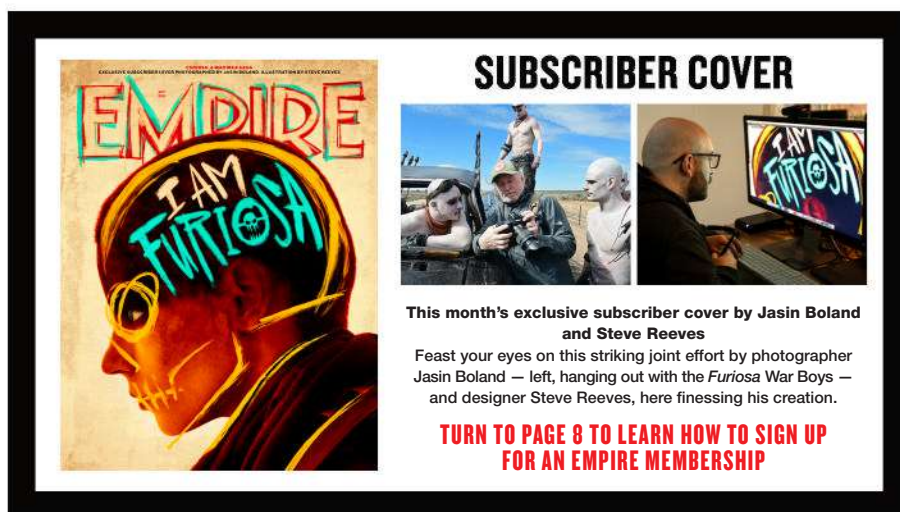
SUBSCRIBER COVER



This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Jasin Boland and Steve Reeves

Feast your eyes on this striking joint effort by photographer Jasin Boland — left, hanging out with the *Furiosa* War Boys — and designer Steve Reeves, here finessing his creation.

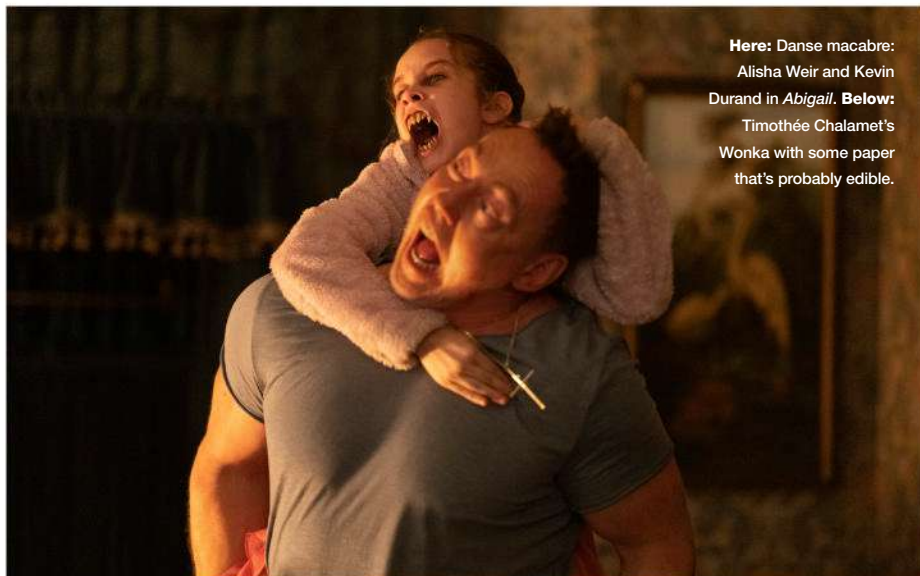
TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE MEMBERSHIP



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TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH



CHRIS HEWITT SPOKE TO GEORGE MILLER FOR OUR COVER STORY

"My marathon interview with the *Furiosa* director — conducted over Zoom as he's based in Sydney — was his first about the movie, not that you'd know. He was a ball of energy, and in the end had to be dragged away to go back to editing, virtually mid-senten..."



KATIE GOH INTERVIEWED OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR NELL TIGER FREE

"People who work in the horror genre are often the sunniest, happiest interview subjects, and Nell was no different. The actor's love for her roles in twisty, creepy projects shone through, even on a grey winter's afternoon. Horror has a new bright star."



JAMES DYER AND BOYD HILTON JOINED JODIE FOSTER ON THE PILOT TV PODCAST

"Having become obsessed with *True Detective: Night Country* during our spoiler specials on Pilot TV+ (subscribe now!), Boyd and I were giddy to sit down for a chat with living legend Jodie Foster. She was extremely gracious and entirely charming."

HAMILTON

DUNE

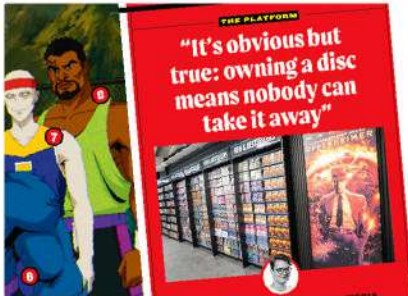
PART TWO

IN CINEMA NOW



EMPIRE COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH



LET'S GET PHYSICAL

Enjoying your latest 'physical copy' and Ben Travis' article ['Owning A Disc Means Nobody Can Take It Away', *The Platform*, issue #425]. I have this debate with friends. At 40 years old, call me old-fashioned, but I'm a proud owner of a growing 4K collection. And you really can't beat having your own personal collection. I intend on reading *Empire* physically just as much as buying movies.

GARETH WOOD, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Physical media, much like the Goonies, never says die. Gareth, for your admirable commitment to tangible things, have a Picturehouse membership on us — and enjoy deciding what will become part of your 4K stash in the future.

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.



ON TOM CRUISE'S FUTURE ROLES:
Will he be running? I think it's important that he does some of his trademark running in whatever he does next. Maybe a remake of *Forrest Gump*?

JASON STAFFORD

TRAILER TRASH

I was incensed by your article about fake movie trailers. If they front-and-centre identified themselves as being fan-made I would have no problem, but the vast majority of the views you so celebrate are from those who have been literally conned into watching them.

MATT DAVIS, LONDON

We would argue we were reporting on, rather than celebrating, a significant phenomenon. Like 'em or lump 'em, fake trailers are worth a closer look.



ON EMPIRE'S STAR WARS PREQUELS
SUBSCRIBER COVER:
Prequels Captain Antilles on a magazine cover was not on my bingo card for this year.

@JACOBBOUSHH

TENET TEASE

Watching Christopher Nolan's *Tenet*, I noticed a character described Oppenheimer's Manhattan Project. Is this the first time a director has hinted at their next film within a movie?

PAUL NAPLETON, WYMONDHAM

It's not even Nolan's first time — the end of Batman Begins teased The Dark Knight's Joker.

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SEE
IN SAM MENDES' BEATLES
QUADRILOGY?



Ringo and Maureen packing their suitcase full of tins of baked beans before they went to India for the first time. That would be a key scene for me.

@MELLOHOG

Jack Black, Paul Rudd, Justin Long and Jason Schwartzman.

@ADAM__BARLOW

Peter Serafinowicz's time has come.

@AIDANMCCOMEDY

Number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9, number 9.

@DRUNKENBOUDDHA

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR
X ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

THE VERY FIRST 'PINT OF MILK' MAY 1994

THIS ISSUE MARKS an important milky milestone in *Empire's* history: 30 years ago this month, we launched the 'How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?' format, kicking things off by asking Willem Dafoe questions like, "Would you ever call a child of yours Daniel?" or, "Have you ever been to Yorkshire?"

Thus began a storied three-decade history (save for a pause between 1998 and 2005), which has seen Hollywood royalty — Robert

De Niro, Charlton Heston, Shirley MacLaine, the Coen brothers — and unlikelier figures — Geri Halliwell, Al Gore, Eric Cantona, Neil Morrissey, Ant & Dec — run the milky gauntlet. Some questions have been quietly discontinued ("Would you eat human flesh if your life depended on it?"; "Have you ever watched hardcore porn?"), but the format remains a beloved *Empire* staple. Head to page 33 for our latest lactose levy.



CONTACT US VIA: EMPIRE MAGAZINE, THE LANTERN, 75 HAMPSTEAD ROAD, LONDON NW1 2PL
LETTERS@EMPIREMAGAZINE.COM / @EMPIREMAGAZINE (#EMPIRELETTERS) / FB.COM/EMPIREMAGAZINE

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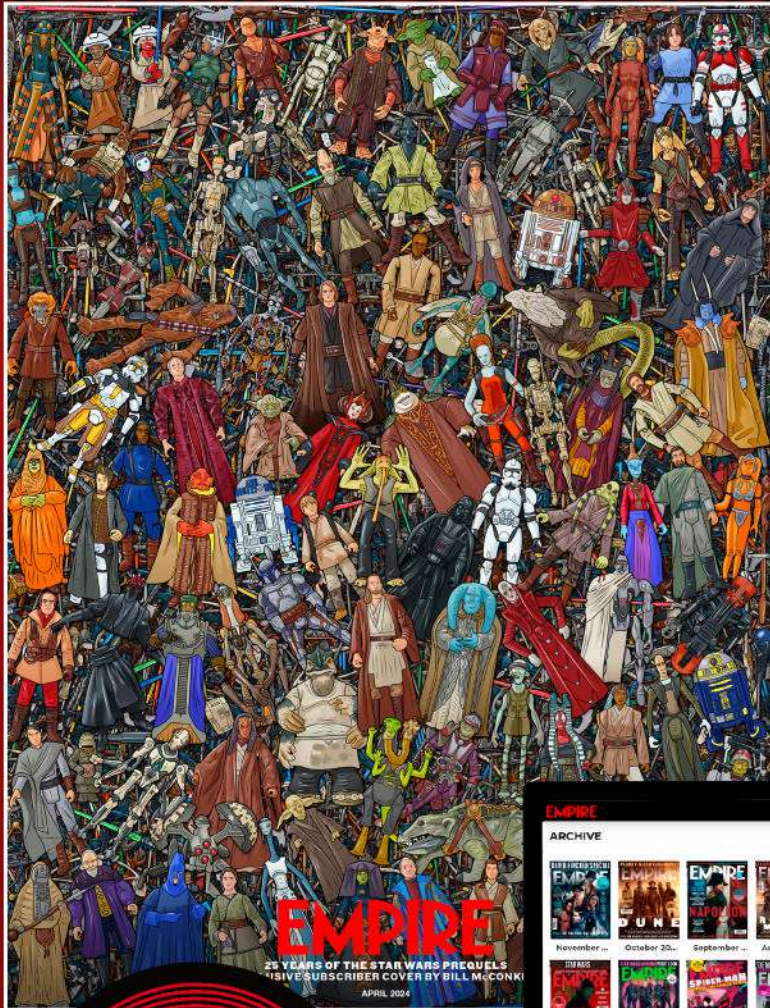
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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

MAY 2024 | EDITED BY BETH WEBB



Jerry Seinfeld's fruit-filled destiny

THE COMEDY STALWART SPEAKS FOR THE FIRST TIME ABOUT HIS DIRECTORIAL DEBUT, UNFROSTED: THE POP-TART STORY

WORDS **BOYD HILTON**

"WHEN I WAS a kid and they invented the Pop-Tart, the back of my head blew right off." This quote from a Jerry Seinfeld stand-up routine, that goes on to describe his love of the "frosted, fruit-filled, heated rectangle", has become the genesis of his directorial debut. Egged on by his writing team — Spike Feresten, Barry Marder and Andy Robin, who all worked with Seinfeld on the 2007 animated feature *Bee Movie* — Jerry was tickled by the idea of depicting the Pop-Tart origin story as if it were a world-shaking event of great historic significance. The writer/director/star tells *Empire* how the whole silly, wholly Seinfeldian project came to, erm... fruition.

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH... THE PERIOD VIBE?

A major element of the appeal of this story for Seinfeld is its setting in the '60s, the decade when he grew up. "I always wanted to be an

adult when I was a kid," he explains. "I wanted to look like adults looked in the '60s, but by the time I got to be an adult they didn't look like that anymore. So this was a chance to go back and do that look." Seinfeld also acknowledges the influence of (mostly) '60s-set TV drama *Mad Men*. "I'm obsessed with that show. That, mixed with the dumbness of the cereal world — you know, stuffy executives discussing tarts and flakes and frosting — just struck me as a fun world to be in."

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH... THE MOVIE REFERENCES?

The turning point in convincing Seinfeld to make the movie was when one of the writers said, "Do you remember the scene in *The Right Stuff* where Jeff Goldblum and Harry Shearer are running down the hall, and they burst into the darkened boardroom and they go, 'It's called... Sputnik!?' That's what this movie is." And Seinfeld thought, "I want to make that movie." The film is full of other



classic-movie references, too, from *The Godfather* to *There Will Be Blood*. "We steal from every movie we could think of because we love movies," says Seinfeld.

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH... THIS CAST?

Alongside Seinfeld himself as a Kellogg's bigwig, every role in the film seems to be played by a big-name actor and/or accomplished comedian, with Melissa McCarthy, Amy Schumer, Dan Levy, James Marsden and Christian Slater all having a wild time. Seinfeld cast the film during



lockdown, and mostly just called friends of his he thought would be keen. "Everybody I asked said 'yes', so we ended up with this crazy cast," he says. And then there's Hugh Grant... "That was the greatest part of the whole thing, honestly," Seinfeld tells us. "Because I am a crazy fan of his." Grant stars as a frustrated, failed Shakespearean actor reduced to playing the Frosties cereal mascot Tony The Tiger to make his car payments. Grant, who hasn't auditioned for a role in 30 years, nevertheless sent Seinfeld an audition tape. "He asked me if it

matters that Tony The Tiger has a British accent," says Seinfeld. "I told him, 'No, who cares?'"

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH... DIRECTING?

Seinfeld has directed bits and pieces, but mostly behind the scenes. *Unfrosted* is his first feature. "Directing is really just telling people what to do, but it was a little more difficult than I expected because there's a lot of money involved," Seinfeld admits. "And people in the film world tend to be bigger personalities to deal with." He did have to

Clockwise from main: They're grrreat! Jerry Seinfeld and Hugh Grant; Cereal drama in the boardroom; Christian Slater milks it; Melissa McCarthy celebrates the start of the tart.

get to grips with some crew unrest. "We had a blow-up on the set. Somebody in the set department started screaming at somebody else. I said, 'Everyone just stop. This is a Pop-Tart movie. None of this matters.'" But a Jerry Seinfeld Pop-Tart movie? *That* matters.

UNFROSTED: THE POP-TART STORY IS ON NETFLIX FROM 3 MAY



Setting fire to the gun for hire

HOW RICHARD LINKLATER
FLIPPED THE SCRIPT ON AN
AGE-OLD GENRE WITH **HIT MAN**

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

WHEN IT COMES to contract-killer movies, you'd be forgiven if Richard Linklater wasn't the first filmmaker to spring to mind. Nor the second, or probably third. Yet the indie auteur's latest, literally called *Hit Man*, isn't your average movie about, well, a hit man. Talking to *Empire*, Linklater recalls his film's premiere at the Venice Film Festival, where by coincidence it played alongside several actual hitmen movies, including David Fincher's *The Killer* — "One of my favourite films of last year" — and the Liam Neeson-fronted *In The Land Of Saints And Sinners*. "Those movies are, as far as I can tell, playing it pretty straight," he observes, laughing. "I'm not."

To make the distinction, you needn't look further than *Hit Man*'s protagonist, a jorts-

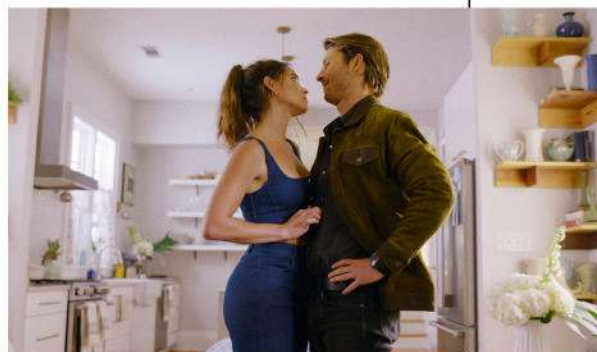
wearing, bespectacled bird enthusiast called Gary, played by the film's co-writer and Linklater's frequent collaborator Glen Powell. He's based on Gary Johnson, a real-life psychology lecturer who moonlighted as a fake contract killer for his local district attorney's office. Linklater stumbled across Johnson via an article in 2001, which confirmed his long-standing suspicions that the 'contract killer' is a made-up notion. "There were these hitman manuals I remember reading; they were pretty silly," he recalls. "Like, 'How To Be A Hitman'. They were part of the underground press." He later discovered that one such manual was in fact written by a Southern Californian housewife. So when he read the article — penned by his *Bernie* co-writer Skip Hollandsworth — he became fascinated by the man sitting incognito across the table, going along with the myth to catch out the real bad guys.

During the 20 years that followed, Linklater continued exploring Gary's world, watching CCTV footage of his interactions and reading transcripts provided by Hollandsworth. "I was just amazed at what little money changed hands," he recalls. "You know, \$2,000. Some



Top: Glen Powell as Gary — or in this instance, 'Ron' — with client Maddy, played by Adria Arjona. **Above:** Director Richard Linklater with his stars on set.

teenager had given him \$5 and some video-games." (This example makes its way into the film.) Then during the pandemic, Linklater received a serendipitous call from his *Everybody Wants Some!!* star Powell, who had discovered Hollandsworth's article himself. During lockdown they noodled over the story, which preserved some of the original article but evolved into a screwball romantic-comedy in which undercover Gary falls for client Maddy (Adria Arjona), and spends more time as his persona of 'Ron' as the pair hit it off. "There was something positive about Gary, so I thought, 'What if he's actually meeting his soulmate to some degree?'" Linklater muses.



Hit Man still has plenty of fun with Gary's profession, though, as he showcases an array of aliases, from a beer-chugging bro in wraparound glasses to a turtleneck-wearing Russian with lank, black hair. "He's grabbing characters from the culture," Linklater explains. "A little Patrick Bateman shows up in the Russian tough guy. He's not a hitman, he's just a psycho. It's just trying to satisfy what the client wants."

Then there's the meta montage of on-screen contract killers used to set up their relationship with pop culture. Linklater highlights that he was extremely particular with his choice of clips. "I don't show the guys from *Pulp Fiction* because they're working for a Mob guy. Those aren't hitmen," he clarifies. Instead, we see flashes of what he refers to as "retail hitmen", aka guns for hire: "My favourite [hitman movie] is maybe *Murder By Contract*, this fairly obscure Irving Lerner film from the late '50s [starring] Vince Edwards. I got him in there for a second." Linklater wonders aloud if it's not too late to add *The Killer* to the montage. "I could sneak in Michael Fassbender looking out of the window," he laughs. Could Fassbender pull off a hit in jorts, though? The jury's out.

HIT MAN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 24 MAY AND ON NETFLIX FROM 7 JUNE

Top to bottom:
Mixing business with pleasure; Star Powell is also co-writer, with Linklater; 'Before Murder'?

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON ROGUE TROOPER



IT'S BASED ON A UK COMICS CLASSIC

Though the titular Rogue Trooper is a dead ringer for Colonel Quaritch in *Avatar: The Way Of Water*, this blue-skinned beefcake has been around for much longer. Created in 1981, Rogue appeared in the UK comic book *2000 AD*, best known for Judge Dredd.

A champion of the mag, *Moon* director Duncan Jones announced his passion project in 2018. The film, which stars *Dunkirk*'s Aneurin Barnard, Hayley Atwell and Jack Lowden, has now wrapped the main portion of its production.

IT'S INDIE FILMMAKING ON AN EPIC SCALE

Adapting *Rogue Trooper* was always going to be challenging: it's a sci-fi epic about a vengeful, genetically modified super-soldier on a war-ravaged Nu-Earth, with his comrades' consciousnesses uploaded to his rifle, helmet and backpack (yes, a sentient backpack). But advances in Unreal Engine, software designed by video-game developers to bring virtual worlds to life, have changed everything. This powerful tool means that Jones can achieve out-of-this-world visuals while maintaining some British indie spirit. Plus the VFX are by Dorset-based filmmakers Treehouse Digital. It doesn't get more homegrown than this.

THIS IS SUPER-POLITICAL SCI-FI

The original comic has strong satirical overtones, borrowing imagery, plot and

even the names of battles from the US Civil War, World War II and the Vietnam War. The endless conflict Rogue finds himself in is between two authoritarian factions who've made Nu-Earth's air unbreathable through the use of bioweapons. War is heck.

BUT IT'S NOT ALL DOOM AND GLOOM

Jones has described *2000 AD*'s body of work as having a Pythonesque streak and described his script on social media as "like if *Guardians Of The Galaxy* had a baby with *The Raid*". It's an intriguingly bonkers-sounding combination, and the cast also features cult comedy favourites Reece Shearsmith (playing the sentient backpack), Jemaine Clement, Matt Berry and Alice Lowe.

THERE COULD BE A LOT MORE TO COME

The wider Trooperverse contains several spin-offs with story potential, including the origins of amoral female soldier Venus Bluegenes. *2000 AD* recently brought Rogue back with a new story in which a time-rift causes him to fight alongside British soldiers from the First World War. He even met Judge Dredd in a one-off special — perhaps Jones will "go rogue" and introduce his trooper to the infamous masked lawman...

LAURA VENNING

ROGUE TROOPER DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE

Andrew Scott gets stranger

IN NETFLIX'S SLICK NEW SERIES **RIPLEY**, THE ACTOR DELVES UNDER THE SKIN OF THE NOTORIOUS CONMAN

WORDS **HAYLEY CAMPBELL**

WHY DO WE have such an enduring fascination with Tom Ripley? The character first entered the world in Patricia Highsmith's 1955 novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, in which he — a young, underachieving nobody — is sent to Italy on an errand to bring back the rich, spoiled Dickie Greenleaf, after which things go bloodily awry. The story of this wayward conman-turned-murderer abroad instantly captured readers. It was immediately adapted into a TV episode for anthology series *Studio One* in 1956. Four more novels followed. Seven actors have portrayed him across film, TV and radio — Alain Delon, Dennis Hopper, Jonathan Kent, Matt Damon, John Malkovich, Barry Pepper and Ian Hart — enough that Highsmith herself had her favourites (Hopper wasn't one of them).

Now, a '60s-set, eight-part series shot in hyper-stylised black and white is coming to Netflix. Written and directed by *The Night Of*'s Steven Zaillian, it stars Andrew Scott, fresh off his



lauded performance in *All Of Us Strangers*, as the sinister nomad who finagles his way — ultimately violently — into the lives of Dickie (Johnny Flynn), his girlfriend Marge (Dakota Fanning) and close friend Freddy (Eliot Sumner). Others might find taking on a literary character with such a history a nerve-racking experience, but Scott — who has played Hamlet on stage, and terrorised audiences as Moriarty to Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock — is no stranger to the task. "You have to be respectful, but not too reverent, because otherwise there's no point in doing this," Scott tells *Empire*. "You've got to put your own stamp on it. Some people will like this version, and some

people will like other versions, and that's okay. What you have to do is understand *why* this character remains so fascinating for people."

Scott says he "didn't go near any other versions", and while he read Highsmith's novels, he didn't study them too deeply. Instead, he focused on Zaillian's scripts. "His work is so economic, and he understands storytelling to such an extraordinary degree. [Those] scripts were my bible." But most of all, Scott didn't want to pin his character down. "I think to characterise him with any very particular neuroses would be a mistake," he says. "I never wanted to look at him as a psychopath. I didn't want to label his sexuality too

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

SAVE THE GREEN PLANET

The long-gestating English-language remake of Jang Joon-Hwan's 2003 fantasy comedy has found its director in **Yorgos Lanthimos**. Eyeing a UK and New York shoot this summer, the movie follows a man convinced that Earth's top brass are reptilian alien invaders.

ELLA McCAY

Rebecca Hall is the latest to join Emma Mackey, Ayo Edebiri and Woody Harrelson in James L. Brooks' first film since 2010. Currently in production, the comedy about an idealistic young politician sees Hall return to the world of government for the first time since 2013's *Closed Circuit*.

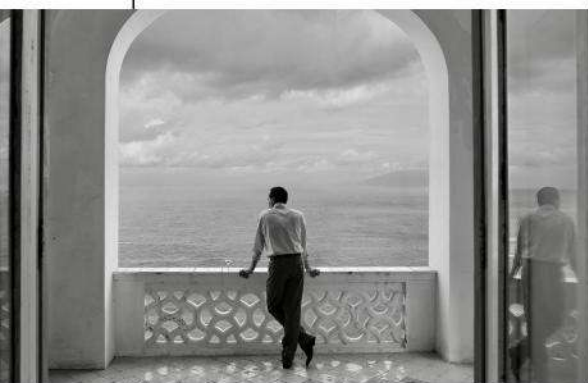
AMERICAN NAILS

A contemporary reimagining of Ancient Greek tragedy *Phaedra* will mark Abel Ferrara and **Willem Dafoe**'s eighth creative collaboration. Described as "a tale set in the gangster world of primal violence, power and revenge", the Mob movie — which also stars Asia Argento — shoots imminently in Italy.





Clockwise from left: Confidence man Tom Ripley (Andrew Scott); The targets: Marge Sherwood (Dakota Fanning) and Dickie Greenleaf (Johnny Flynn); Dickie's friend Freddy Miles (Eliot Sumner); Ripley lurks in the shadows; And is on the look-out.



much. I didn't want to just diagnose him with anything. The challenge was not to judge him."

What Scott wants is for the audience to experience the reality of Ripley's situation, from Ripley's point of view. To see the blood, the body, the situation, and think, "What would I do?" "I think that's what makes it so tense. You go, 'Oh my God, what would happen? How do you clear up your mess? What can go wrong?'"

Scott points out that it's also a deeply intimate relationship between the audience and the conman Ripley. We are the only ones who see everything he does, and what makes this adaptation so different from the others is that we get to spend eight hours with him. Many of those are wordless scenes of Ripley on his own; nothing but the sound of his shoes on the parquet floor, or the metallic scream of an old elevator outside the front door. For Scott, it made for a psychologically taxing shoot, one he describes as "a solitary experience" — and one even heavier than his role in *All Of Us Strangers*. Shot at the height of the pandemic, cast and crew were isolated from their family and friends, and in many scenes, Scott was isolated from everyone else but Ripley. But having spent so much time with him, Scott is still (deliberately) no closer to knowing who Ripley really is.

"Tom Ripley does not set out to do the things that he does," he says. "At the beginning of the story, he's not somebody who is a murderer. He just has to survive, and something happens. And this is the first time he's doing it. There's no twirly-moustache stuff here. He's not immune, or cold-blooded. His great talent, of course, is that he is a shapeshifter." Scott believes Highsmith "taps into the sort of fear that we all have, which is: can you ever really know anybody?" If Ripley's victims are anything to go by, the answer is a resounding "no".

RIPLEY IS ON NETFLIX FROM 4 APRIL

A BIG BOLD BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY

After *Yang* filmmaker Kogonada and *The Menu* scribe Seth Reiss' new fantasy romance has been snapped up by Sony Pictures. **Margot Robbie** and Colin Farrell play strangers connected by, well, a big bold beautiful journey. Principal photography starts in California this spring.

UNTITLED BONG JOON HO ANIMATED MOVIE

Bong hit inbound! With his R-Pattz sci-fi *Mickey 17*'s release bumped to 2025, production is ramping up on **Bong Joon Ho**'s first animated feature. A secretive deep-sea odyssey, the *Parasite* director's latest will reportedly be the most expensive Korean movie ever made.

GOOD LUCK, HAVE FUN, DON'T DIE

Zazie Beetz has hopped aboard the ensemble for Gore Verbinski's new action-adventure. Currently in pre-production, this romp has Sam Rockwell leading a team featuring Michael Peña, Haley Lu Richardson and Juno Temple on a quest to save the world from rogue AI.

UNTITLED ALEJANDRO G. INARRITU MOVIE

Tom Cruise will lead the director's first English-language film since *The Revenant*. Details on the project, written by Iñárritu, Sabina Berman and *Birdman*'s Alexander Dinolaris and Nicolás Jacobone, are scarce. But with its two movie Mavericks, we're hyped already.

THE LOST BUS

Barbie's **America Ferrera** has joined Paul Greengrass' new drama with Matthew McConaughey. The film, set to shoot in spring, focuses on a teacher (Ferrera) and bus driver's (McConaughey) efforts to escort a school bus full of children to safety amid 2018's deadly Californian wildfires.



Trailer Talk



TEAM *EMPIRE* BREAKS DOWN
THE BIG HITTERS, FROM
A MULTIVERSAL MERC
TO MONKEY MAYHEM



Deadpool & Wolverine

"MARVEL JESUS" MAKES HIS ULTRA-META DISNEY DEBUT

Ben Travis (Deputy Online Editor): The MCU has got quite heavy and the thing that can bring the fun back is Deadpool. I'm more excited about him being connected to the MCU than having a straight-up 'Deadpool 3'.

Sophie Butcher (Social Media Editor): They could've splashed Wolverine all over this trailer, but instead it teases you really well.

Graham Jones (Deputy Art Director): I get the sense watching this that when we first meet Wade, he's trying to be more of a regular person than a superhero at this point.

Ben: He's Ethan Hunt in *Mission: Impossible III*, with his domestic life.

Beth Webb (News Editor): And then these TVA guys go and ruin it all! Do we think they're straight out of *Loki*?

Ben: They look more militaristic, maybe because it's Deadpool, and they know that he could kick their asses.

Sophie: I am amazed that they managed to get a pegging joke in there. How has Ryan

Reynolds convinced Disney to put this in the trailer?

John Nugent (Reviews Editor): I love the thought of some 123 million Americans watching the Super Bowl and then parents across the country having to explain what pegging is to their children.

Beth: "It's German."

Sophie: I believe that the person shown from behind in the leather coat is Emma Corrin's character. Because they've got a shaved head, right?

John: We get a look at Matthew Macfadyen as Mr Paradox as well. It's good to see that the MCU has gained a disgusting brother.

Graham: There's a great shot of a giant, partially buried 20th Century Fox logo behind Deadpool during one fight sequence. Do we think that's been pruned?

Sophie: They pruned 20th Century Fox?

John: I think it's a very Reynolds way of addressing that Disney bought out Fox while these films were being made.

Beth: The shot with Wolverine's shadow over him says it all, doesn't it? It shows the power balance, it's a little playful, a little menacing.

Ben: It seems like they're holding so much back, because the film is *Deadpool & Wolverine*, so I imagine they're going to go on some journey together. I think they're absolutely teasing us here with just this single second of footage.



Wicked

WE'RE OFF TO SEE THE SPIN-OFF,
THE MUSICAL SPIN-OFF OF OZ

Beth: I'm amazed that it's taken this long for this to be turned into a film.

John: It's a big thing. But what does it have to offer me?

Beth: Two words...

John: 'Defying Gravity'.

Graham: This trailer goes straight in with the iconography. You've got the steaming witch's hat, the yellow brick road. I think this will expand nicely on the stage play.

Sophie: I do like the character design of Elphaba. It must be done with practical effects. The architectural design seems very cool as well.

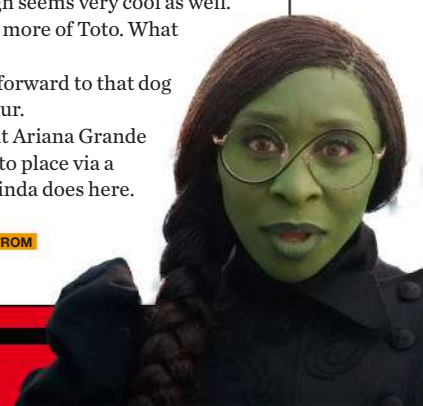
Ben: I'd like to see more of Toto. What a scruffy little guy.

Beth: I'm looking forward to that dog actor's publicity tour.

Ben: I imagine that Ariana Grande travels from place to place via a giant bubble, as Glinda does here.

WICKED IS IN CINEMAS FROM
29 NOVEMBER

DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 26 JULY





Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes

THE LATEST SIMIAN SEQUEL PROMISES NEW PISSED-OFF PRIMATES

Ben: This is such a great opening line for the trailer: "Are you familiar with the concept of evolution?" It really sets out what this film means for the series moving forward.

Sophie: That these apes have no concept of the idea of being held captive is really interesting.

Ben: It makes me wonder if Proximus Caesar, the bad guy, is trying to spin that these new apes evolved from humans.

Beth: I just can't get over the technology. It's quite eerie looking at the details in their faces.

John: It's some of the best CGI in modern cinema, I would say.

Ben: It's nice to see this level of post-apocalypse as well, because all of the apocalyptic stuff that we get nowadays is quite dour, whereas this looks so lush.

Graham: Nature's taken over again.

Beth: This is actually set in late 2020. The humans are all hunkered down rewatching *The Sopranos* while this is happening outside.

John: The Golden Gate Bridge makes a reappearance here after it showed up at the end of *Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes*.

Beth: It reminds me of Brighton Pier. Maybe they're all heading out for a big Saturday night.

Sophie: It could be the Tyne Bridge, let's not rule anything out.

John: A lot of shots feel very nostalgic and inspired by the first film.

Beth: Yet, it still feels fresh.

Ben: They're able to use the feeling created by the new trilogy but then there's a nod towards the original films as well. They're having fun playing in that middle ground, and it looks amazing.

Beth: So this main monkey is related to Caesar from the pre-existing films?

Ben: I don't think so. This is a different Caesar, who's given himself a slightly different name



so he sounds all Billy Big Balls.

John: Not to put on my history-nerd hat but during Roman times, Caesar was just the name that his successor took on because he thought, "Well, Caesar sounds powerful."

Beth: You really are one of those Roman Empire men.

Ben: Do you think about *Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes* every day?

Graham: Proximus does have that King Louie vibe to him. He wants everything that the humans had.

Ben: And they're running through the jungle. Is this actually *The Jungle Book*?

Sophie: Freya Allan's character Mae seems to be more evolved than the other human characters. Maybe her costuming is a symbol of her being an outlier.

Ben: I need to revisit the original film, because I feel like there are going to be some big references in here. I haven't seen it since I was a kid.

Beth: We were children of the *Simpsons* parody.

John: [Adopts Troy McClure voice] "Can I play the piano anymore?"

Ben: [Chanting] "Dr Zaius, Dr Zaius..."

KINGDOM OF THE PLANET OF THE APES IS IN CINEMAS

FROM 24 MAY

Twisters

STRAP IN FOR DOUBLE TROUBLE, STORMS AND STUBBLE



Graham: It's nice to be coming back to something like this after all these years, but they're also trying something fresh with it.

Beth: This is the most exciting casting line-up of the year for me. We're heading into Glen Powell Summer, plus there's *Love Lies Bleeding's* Katy O'Brian, and Brandon Perea, who had a great breakout in *Nope*.

Ben: It's Perea's second film where he's part of a ragtag crew trying to analyse an unknowable vast phenomenon in the sky, which is a weird coincidence.

John: The shot in this trailer where Powell's tipping his cowboy hat is just pure movie star. I'm really happy to see him truly becoming what he was born to be.

Sophie: Of course his character calls himself 'Tornado Wrangler'. And it looks like he's filming himself doing these hurricane chases. It looks very guerrilla and cool.

Beth: He's like the Logan Paul of natural disasters.

Ben: It's a huge moment when we actually see the twisters from the movie *Twisters*.

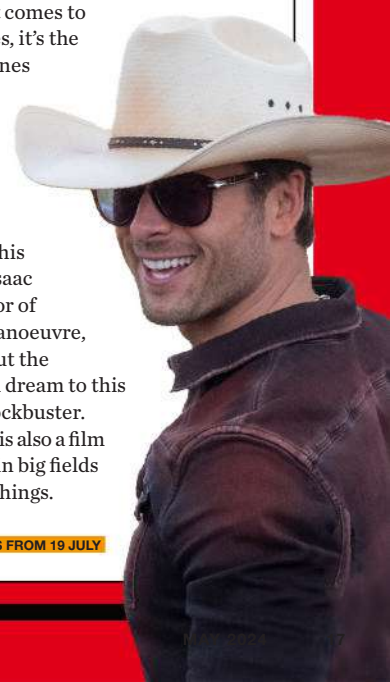
John: Ben's recreating the Leonardo DiCaprio pointing meme.

Ben: I'm so excited to see this kind of film back as well. I feel like in big spectacle movies today we miss the physical brunt of it. Whereas this is really zoning into, "We're going to put you in the middle of a tornado and see what happens."

Graham: When it comes to apocalyptic movies, it's the natural-disaster ones that scare me the most. I can deal with zombies, I can deal with *kaiju* monsters, but not this.

Beth: I love that this comes from Lee Isaac Chung, the director of *Minari*. What a manoeuvre, from a drama about the Korean-American dream to this white-knuckle blockbuster.

Ben: In a way, this is also a film about Americans in big fields trying to achieve things.



TWISTERS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 JULY



How the game-changing Beatles biopics could come together

WITH SAM MENDES' FAB FOUR FILMS INCOMING, *EMPIRE* TAKES A MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR OF STORYTELLING POSSIBILITIES

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**  **RUSSELL MOORCROFT**

THE BEATLES WERE so groundbreaking that a conventional biopic was never going to suffice. They deserve something more audacious and ambitious. Which is why Sam Mendes' grand plan to direct not one, not two, not three, but four films about John, Paul, George and Ringo,

to be shot back-to-back and released in 2027, is so exciting. He's asked the big question: what would The Beatles do? And acted accordingly. Each movie will focus on an individual Beatle, with their stories ultimately overlapping. But what can we expect? Here's what we'd like to see.

JOHN LENNON

THE PERSONALITY: The force of nature that drove The Beatles, Lennon has been played on screen more than any other member of the group, by the likes of Ian Hart (a couple of times) and Aaron Taylor-Johnson. But perhaps Mendes' movie will finally capture all sides of Lennon in one package: the wit, the charisma, the darkness, the restlessness, the occasional madness and, of course, the genius.

THE MOMENT: Did Lennon, then in the thrall of LSD, really convene a meeting of the band in 1968 to tell them all that he was Jesus Christ? Did Ringo really respond by declaring that he was going for lunch? Perhaps we'll finally know the answer. Another moment that will surely make it in: the time he met Yoko Ono, and everything changed.

THE MUSIC: Picking a single Lennon Beatles track is almost impossible. There's 'Help!', the jauntiest song ever written about depression. The stark beauty of 'In My Life'. But we'd love to see and hear Lennon at his most experimental with 'I Am The Walrus'. Goo goo g'joob, indeed.

THE PLATFORM

“We’re seeing ‘strong female character’ taken to a whole new, more literal level”



SOPHIE BUTCHER ON HOW A TIDE IS TURNING FOR WOMEN'S BODIES ON SCREEN

AS I TYPE the words “strong female character”, I can practically hear your eyes rolling. For decades, as the calls for better, wider representation in film and TV have got louder, Hollywood’s primary solution to more varied characters outside of the most common white male protagonist appears to have been just that: a woman who is fierce, badass, or “feisty”. A woman who is “strong”.

Time and time again, we’ve been given “strong” female leads who are undoubtedly cool, but always conventional — think Charlize Theron in *Atomic Blonde*, Scarlett Johansson’s Black Widow in the MCU, or Gal Gadot as *Wonder Woman*. But with the arrival of *Love Lies Bleeding*, from *Saint Maud* director Rose Glass, we’re seeing the concept taken to a whole new, more literal level. It follows Jackie (Katy O’Brian), a female bodybuilder whose dreams of competing in Vegas are derailed by a romance with gym manager Lou (Kristen Stewart). O’Brian has real-life bodybuilding experience, and Jackie is, truly, jacked. All bulging biceps and rock-hard abs, it’s a female body type we’re not used to seeing, and is still, as Glass tells *Empire*, “inherently punk”.

The small screen, too, is delivering on this front. The latest season of *True Detective*, *Night Country*, sees Jodie Foster’s Alaskan police chief Liz Danvers team up with State Trooper Evangeline Navarro, played by professional boxing

champion Kali Reis. Navarro is a stoic presence, exerting strength through her work and mission against misogyny in their small town, and showing her physical dominance during sex with local bar owner Qavvik (Joel D. Montgrand). Sex is important here. Both *True Detective* and *Love Lies Bleeding* subvert stereotypes in their intimate scenes — the former in how the woman is in control, and the latter in its depiction of sexual power dynamics — and their foregrounding of visibly physically strong women signifies a move away from a traditional heterosexual male gaze towards a more queer female one.

This kind of character harks all the way back to someone like Linda Hamilton in the *Terminator* movies, transformed from the ingénue of the first film to a ripped, revenge-seeking Sarah Connor in *Judgment Day*, but has gathered momentum in the past few years. Recent examples include Michelle Rodriguez as burly barbarian Holga in last year’s *Dungeons & Dragons: Honour Among Thieves*, and Viola Davis and Lashana Lynch as fearsome, muscle-bound Dahomey warriors in 2022’s *The Woman King*. Looking ahead, relevant projects include UFC fighter drama *Starweight* starring Lupita Nyong’o and Chloë Grace Moretz, and *Queen Of The Ring*, a biopic about first-ever million-dollar female athlete Mildred Burke. Time to renew that gym membership...

PAUL McCARTNEY

THE PERSONALITY: If the first half of The Beatles’ short career was shaped by Lennon, roughly speaking, the second half saw McCartney, the master melodicist, come to the fore. He drove projects like *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the *Magical Mystery Tour*, and the medley that concludes their last recorded work, *Abbey Road*. His movie might see him continue to emerge from Lennon’s long shadow.

THE MOMENT: It’s already been documented so well in Peter Jackson’s *Get Back*, but that time he conjures that song from thin air just by strumming on his bass. How would Mendes depict this moment of pure creativity?

THE MUSIC: Throw a dart. Pick one. ‘Yesterday’. ‘Hey Jude’. ‘Can’t Buy Me Love’. The man never missed. Well, except for maybe ‘Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da’.

GEORGE HARRISON

THE PERSONALITY: The Quiet Beatle, they called him. Which wasn’t entirely true — like the other Beatles, Harrison was blessed with that dry Liverpudlian wit and a way with words — although it took a long time for him to truly find his voice within the band and express himself through something other than his lead guitar. That evolution could be truly compelling, particularly as Harrison becomes more spiritually attuned and develops his interest in Eastern philosophy and sounds.

THE MOMENT: We don’t want to simply zero in on moments from *Get Back*, such as the time Harrison quit the band for a (very) short while, but it’s hard to ignore. Here was a truly great guitarist and songwriter who just happened to be in a group containing two of the greatest songwriters of all time, who were perhaps less than encouraging about his efforts. The psychological toll of that would be fascinating to explore.

THE MUSIC: It has to be ‘Something’, a contender for the best song in the entire Beatles discography.

RINGO STARR

THE PERSONALITY: Late to the party, Ringo didn’t join The Beatles until August 1962, when he replaced Pete Best, but didn’t miss a beat after that. Ebullient and energetic, perhaps his film could dispel the notion that he wasn’t even the band’s best drummer.

THE MOMENT: When a young Scouser called Richard Starkey sheds that name while playing for Rory Storm And The Hurricanes, and all because he wore rings. Frodo was already taken.

THE MUSIC: He sang ‘Yellow Submarine’, ‘With A Little Help From My Friends’, and a bunch of covers, but as a songwriter he contributed two tunes to The Beatles’ canon. We’d love to see the moment when he wrote ‘Don’t Pass Me By’, in particular the lines: “I’m sorry that I doubted you/I was so unfair/You were in a car crash/And I lost your hair.” Pure poetry.

THE BEATLES FILMS WILL BE IN CINEMAS IN 2027



On A Role

CYNTHIA ERIVO AS JACQUELINE

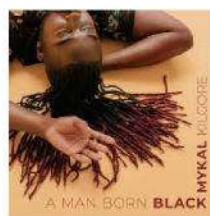
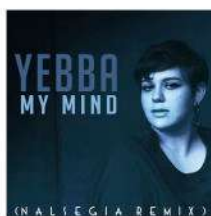
THE ACTOR STARS AS
A DISPLACED WOMAN FIGHTING
FOR SURVIVAL IN REFUGEE
DRAMA **DRIFT**

THE FAMILY CONNECTION

In *Drift*, Cynthia Erivo plays a Liberian woman who's fled the country's civil war, ending up scabbling for survival under the piercing blue summer sky on a Greek island. For character background, Erivo turned to her mum, Edith, who'd been displaced as a 15-year-old girl during Nigeria's Biafran War of the late 1960s. "I used her as my biggest resource," she says, before joking that it can be typically hard to extract personal memories from her parents' generation. But her mum opened up. "She would talk about the fear she felt, about how she and her siblings didn't know if they would be able to find food or shelter at any time." The conversations further connected Erivo to Jacqueline's determination.

THE SETTING

Shooting on location in Greece, Erivo let herself feel as uncomfortable as Jacqueline might,



Top to bottom: Refugee Jacqueline (Cynthia Erivo) escapes to a Greek island; A moment of contemplation; Bonding with Callie (Alia Shawkat); Musical inspirations.

hungry and exposed to the elements on rocky terrain. "At night, you let the cold, the dark, the wind and the sounds affect you so that you can do something that's completely truthful," she says. Preparing to bed down in makeshift shelters under a threadbare blanket helped her to tap into Jacqueline's guarded physicality.

"When you're cold, your muscles tense up, you can't necessarily think straight — and you use those things to your advantage."

THE CLOTHES

Flashback scenes show Jacqueline's content, middle-class life in the UK before suffering a life-changing trauma while visiting family in Liberia. With little more than the clothes on her back in Greece, Jacqueline rotates between a couple of T-shirts and a denim skirt. Erivo and costume designer Matina Mavraganni chose to mostly dress Jacqueline in washed-out shades of blue to blend her into the background. "The blue is also reminiscent of water, of where she is — there's an unattached-ness that blue has, and I wanted that for her. It's not a colour that screams, 'This is me.' There's no statement in it, necessarily. It's something that she can disappear in."

THE MUSIC

Before shooting, Erivo would listen to a prep playlist on morning runs "because it gave me a sense of release" from all the tension that Jacqueline carried in her neck and shoulders. Tracy Chapman's 'Remember The Tinman', YEBBA's 'My Mind' and 'Let Me Go' by Mykal Kilgore all featured. "A lot of those songs are about our relationship to memory, and about particular people, too," she says. "Those themes are what Jacqueline is consistently fighting against and fighting through: the loss of something, the memory of something, and trying to make the connection between all of it." In her portrayal of a woman trying to rebuild her life — and as a producer on the film — Erivo has forged a connection all of her own.

TSHEPO MOKOENA

DRIFT IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 MARCH

A PERSONAL TRIP THOUGH POWELL AND PRESSBURGER

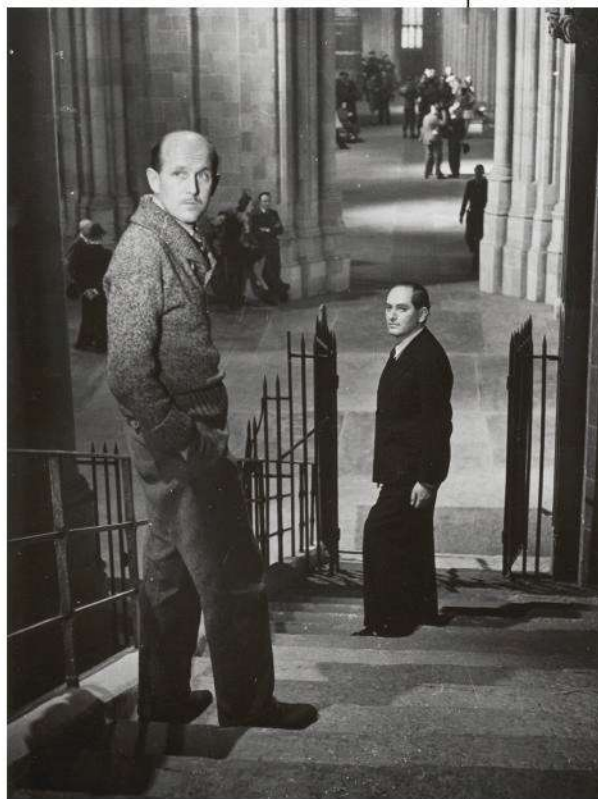
**MADE IN ENGLAND'S CREATORS
ON CRAFTING A UNIQUE HOMAGE
TO TWO LEGENDS**

DOCUMENTARIES ABOUT FILMMAKERS are often made by fans of their subject. It's rare, though, to get three people as deeply and personally invested as the makers of *Made In England: The Films Of Powell And Pressburger*. It is presented by Martin Scorsese, a long-avowed enthusiast of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger; edited by Thelma Schoonmaker, Scorsese's longtime collaborator and Powell's widow; and directed by David Hinton, who has his own history with Powell.

"It was incredibly personal for all of us," says Hinton. "In the '80s, I made a film for *The South Bank Show* about Michael. I was a friend of Michael's at the end of his life. Thelma and I have stayed friends ever since." When the prospect of a documentary emerged, Scorsese and Schoonmaker recommended that Hinton helm the project. The result is an ambitious love letter to the minds behind *The Red Shoes*, *A Matter Of Life And Death* and *Black Narcissus*, five years in the making, blending archival material, film clips, and Scorsese's narration.

Hinton began by looking at "everything that Scorsese had ever said about Powell and Pressburger... which was a lot!" Adds Schoonmaker: "Scorsese is just *always* talking about them." His words became the starting point for the script, inspiring the documentary's meticulous structure.

The film explores how influential Powell



and Pressburger's films have been for the director of *Killers Of The Flower Moon*. "Think what a strange child Martin Scorsese must have been," Hinton says with a smile, "that he was riveted by [surrealist experimental opera film] *The Tales Of Hoffman*, at the age of ten! That sort of film would have bored me out of my brain when I was ten. But he was

Clockwise from left: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger during the filming of *A Canterbury Tale* (1944); Moira Shearer in *The Red Shoes* (1948); Kathleen Byron as Sister Ruth in *Black Narcissus* (1947).



fascinated by it. I hope one of the things we're doing in the documentary is going into his film subconscious, where all those films are lurking." Schoonmaker agrees: "They inspire him. It's delightful to see how he transforms those influences into his own."

Condensing two men's remarkable lives into two hours was not easy. There were, Hinton and Schoonmaker admit, some "very painful" decisions in the cutting room. "It was hard," sighs Schoonmaker. "But Scorsese was quite adamant with us that he wanted to tantalise people — have them go look at the movies themselves." Get ready: your film subconscious is about to get deeper.

JOHN NUGENT

**MADE IN ENGLAND: THE FILMS OF POWELL AND PRESSBURGER
IS IN CINEMAS FROM 10 MAY**

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S WILD RIDE

HOW THE *OPPENHEIMER* DIRECTOR KEPT SURPRISING US THIS AWARDS SEASON

THE PELTON SAGA

Nolan revealed while accepting his Golden Globe that, during a Peloton cycling class he was taking virtually, the instructor insulted *Tenet*, saying, "That's a couple hours of my life I'll never get back again." The director quipped at the Globes, "Nothing but love for Peloton, but I did not climb on it today."

THE FIELDER COLLAB

A surprising meeting of minds occurred when Nolan moderated a Q&A with *Oppenheimer*'s Benny Safdie and oddball comic Nathan Fielder, co-creators of *The Curse*.

He deemed the latter's cringe-inducing *The Rehearsal* "revolutionary television" — here's hoping a Fielder/Nolan collab is on the cards.

THE BENNY HILL HOMAGE

Viewers of *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* in February watched in delight as Nolan and his host recreated a sombre scene from *Oppenheimer* (Colbert in the Cillian Murphy role), only for it to descend into a classic Benny Hill-style chase scene, complete with signature theme tune.

THE FAST & FURIOUS FERVOUR

Don't know where to start with the auto action franchise? Nolan has got you covered. "It's only the last few where a specific arc and mythology develop," he advised Colbert during his *Late Show* appearance. "I would start with *Tokyo Drift* and watch it as its own thing." Pass the Coronas.

BETH WEBB





A film of pure imagination

JOHN KRASINSKI ON TURNING MAKE BELIEVE INTO HIS LATEST MOVIE, IF

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

"FROM THE IMAGINATION of John Krasinski", trumpets the trailer for *IF*, the new movie from the actor-director behind *A Quiet Place* and its sequel. Given that it's a film in which imaginary friends, or IFs, turn out to be real, it begs the question, "Just what kind of imagination is that?" Krasinski ponders the poser. "You know, on *A Quiet Place*, we were on a farm and convincing our department heads that the creatures are over here was a lot easier than, 'We're in a retirement home for IFs.' I'm pretty sure my crew thought I was on drugs 90 per cent of the time."

He wasn't, of course. Krasinski has had the world of *IF* in his head for years, ever since he and his wife, Emily Blunt, had their first daughter Hazel in 2014. "I had this idea about imaginary friends being used as coping mechanisms," he tells *Empire*. As Covid hit, Krasinski saw the impact it was having on his kids. "I could see that light dwindle within them," he says, "and I thought, 'We've got to make sure these kids know that, even on hard days, there's something there for you always: your imagination.'"

So Krasinski centred *IF* on Bea (Cailey Fleming) — a young girl who finds she can see all imaginary friends — recruited Ryan Reynolds as her upstairs neighbour who has the same gift, and off he went. His mantra throughout: to make *IF* akin to a live-action Pixar. "If we could even get close to something like that, that would be amazing," he admits. "The movie has a heartbeat, rather than just being a zany movie with the nuttiest characters we can come up with."

That said, nutty characters abound, including Krasinski's former *The Office* co-worker Steve Carell as "giant, adorable Squishmallow" Blue, who finds himself bonding with Bea; Blunt as a unicorn called Uni; Phoebe Waller-Bridge as Blossom, a butterfly from a bygone age; and Lou Gossett Jr as Louis, the imaginary friend who began this ragtag cabal. All were attracted by Krasinski's screenplay, and quite possibly that title: *IF*.

Only two letters, but it just might be the biggest word in the English language. "I sat down to write the first page," recalls Krasinski of the moment he found the title. "You get the prompt to do the title page, and I just typed it. It sort of popped right out. It was a nice little gateway into the whole thing."

Almost, in fact, as if he had help from an imaginary friend. "As I'm saying this, I thought the same thing," laughs Krasinski. "It's true. Something's driving me, standing right behind me, just waiting for me to turn



Clockwise from main: Blossom (voiced by Phoebe Waller-Bridge) with Bea (Cailey Fleming); Feeling Blue: Steve Carell; Ryan Reynolds (left) as Cal; Fleming with John Krasinski.

around." Is your imaginary friend in the room with us, John? Can you describe it? "No, I can't," cries Krasinski. "It's mine, and mine alone!" John Krasinski's imagination, running wild, out in the open. Catch it if you can.

IF IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 MAY

THE MONTHLY MIXTAP

**EMPIRE MIXMASTER
AMON WARMANN SELECTS
THIS MONTH'S
ESSENTIAL TUNES**

**'KNUCK IF YOU BUCK'
CRIME MOB FEAT. LIL SCRAPPY**

KNUCKLES (TRAILER)

An inspired and perfectly fitting choice for Sonic The Hedgehog's red-furred ally, which will introduce a whole new generation to this early noughties classic.

**'SOAR'
BLAKE NEELY**

MASTERS OF THE AIR

The patriotic trumpets are spot on for a band of US airmen fighting the good fight in World War II. When the rest of the orchestra joins in, this heroic track is true to its title.

**'AQUA'
RYUICHI SAKAMATO
MONSTER**

Sakamoto's final track is a rich and soul-stirring piano composition. His music will be missed, but the late, great composer leaves things on a fine note.

**'MUNDIAN TO BACH KE -
JAY-Z REMIX'
PANJABI MC**

MONKEY MAN (TRAILER)

The memorable tumbi riff of this Bhangra anthem still slaps after two decades, and it's perfectly deployed in the kick-ass trailer for Dev Patel's directorial debut.

**'A TIME OF QUIET
BETWEEN THE STORMS'
HANS ZIMMER**

DUNE: PART TWO

This track starts off peaceful before Vangelis-esque synths and thunderous drums bring Zimmer's typical bombast. No space bagpipes, no problem.

**LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE EMPIRE SPOTIFY
ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE**



A COX AMONG THE PIGEONS

THE FORMER LOGAN ROY CHANGES PACE WITH BIRD-RACING DRAMA LITTLE WING

NOT CONTENT WITH having embodied one of the greatest screen characters in *Succession*, Brian Cox is still seeking new challenges. "I'm at the age where I can't remember why I came into a room," the 77-year-old chuckles. "So, you want to do things that keep testing you." Cox's latest test is starring alongside racing pigeons in coming-of-age drama *Little Wing*. Here, he explains how to work with birds — without getting your feathers ruffled.

EXPECT BOISTEROUSNESS

Cox plays Jaan, a Portland pigeon-fancier whose prize specimen is stolen — then lost — by 13-year-old Kaitlyn (Brooklynn Prince). The pair become unlikely friends when they unite to retrieve the bird. "I had to interact a fair bit with the pigeons," Cox tells us. "They could be quite boisterous, but once they were in their cages, they were actually rather well-behaved. And I didn't get shat on once," he adds, cheerily.

RESPECT THE HANDLERS

In addition to the story, Cox was impressed by the commitment of the real-life pigeon-fanciers on set. "We had great people handling the birds," he says. "You had huge respect for them because they were so knowledgeable and dedicated to this culture [of pigeon-flying]. I just did whatever they told me." Witnessing the handlers' profound affection for their feathered friends fed



Top to bottom: Flight of fancy: Kaitlyn (Brooklynn Prince) and Jaan (Brian Cox) bond over pigeons; Jaan looks to the sky; Kaitlyn is cooped up.

into Cox's creation of Jaan: "He's irascible, but only because he's lost his favourite bird. And he's right — there's no defence for that. You don't go around stealing world-class pigeons!"

DO YOUR RESEARCH

As well as the 2006 *New Yorker* article *Little Wing* is based on, Cox looked back at various avian appearances on film. "[Marlon] Brando keeps pigeons in *On The Waterfront*," he notes. "And there's the Nazi playwright and his birds in *The Producers*." As to whether Cox will be shelling out for his own coop anytime soon, probably not. "I'm not about to start collecting racing pigeons," he laughs. "I haven't got time. But I wanted an adventure — and that's what this film was." The quest for new challenges is off to a flying start.

TOM ELLEN

LITTLE WING IS ON PARAMOUNT+ FROM 14 MARCH



Zack Snyder strikes back

WITH **REBEL MOON — PART TWO: THE SCARGIVER**,
THE DIRECTOR IS COMING BACK SWINGING

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

ZACK SNYDER DOES not seem like the kind of guy who is glued to RottenTomatoes.com. Nevertheless, he is very aware that his sci-fi opus, *Rebel Moon — Part One: A Child Of Fire* received something of a critical mauling when it hit Netflix in December. “I don’t really have a rebuttal to the reviews,” he says, when *Empire* catches up with him. “For whatever reason, the reaction to my movies is very polarising, and it always has been. The movie, it doesn’t seem like there’s that much in it that would warrant such visceral responses.”

Snyder is in an affable mood when *Empire* speaks to him in late February, perhaps because mere minutes before the interview he completed work on *Rebel Moon — Part Two: The Scargiver*. “They’re down at editorial, drinking champagne,” he laughs. And with this instalment, Snyder is ready to prove detractors wrong.

For starters, *Part Two* will properly amp up the Kurosawa, focusing on the conflict between the overwhelming forces of the evil Imperium, led by Ed Skrein’s Atticus Noble, and a peaceful farming village and the warriors, recruited in the first film, tasked with defending it. “It’s a war film, 100 per cent,” says Snyder. “It’s got way more action than the first movie, very intense and crazy action.”

The Scargiver of the title, Sofia Boutella’s Kora, the ringleader of the rebels and former Imperium soldier, will be at the epicentre of all of *Part Two*’s mayhem. “She’s shielding us from



her real involvement, and there’s a bit of conflict around what she’s done,” says Snyder. “But in the end, what she offers the group, her skillset and her desire to redeem herself, makes her a powerful asset.” Kora’s journey also takes her to, presumably, a space version of Supercuts for a severe new hairdo, seen above. “That’s her Imperium haircut,” says Snyder. “What’s cool is that in the movie Sofia cuts it herself, and we did it on the day.”

And Kora isn’t the only returning character to be working with higher stakes. After hanging out in a field of wheat for much of *Part One*, Jimmy the warrior robot (voiced by Anthony Hopkins) might finally be about to weigh in and show why his prowess is talked about in hushed tones. “He plays a much bigger role,” promises Snyder. “I feel

like Jimmy is at the point where he’s got to decide whether he wants to really fight. That’s a big question.” Prepare for an even bigger answer.

Snyder has also committed to raising the emotional ante, as Kora’s band of soldiers, and the villagers, start to lay their lives on the line. “It’s absolutely an emotional rollercoaster you’re going to be on with these cats,” adds Snyder. “We discover the backstories of our heroes, and there is an interesting correlation between what’s happened to most of them to make this battle cathartic and symbolic.”

The filmmaker and his team may be popping the corks after completing *Part Two*, but there’s still work to be done. Snyder and his collaborators, including his producer/wife Deborah Snyder and co-writers Shay Hatten and

Clockwise from left: Kora (Sofia Boutella) is in fighting mood; Zack Snyder on set; Kora with the Queen (Rhian Rees), the King (Cary Elwes) and Princess Issa (Stella Grace Fitzgerald); Tarak (Staz Nair) and General Titus (Djimon Hounsou); Atticus Noble (Ed Skrein) makes an entrance.



Kurt Johnstad, are drawing up plans for *Rebel Moon* podcasts and comic books and a TV prequel focused on Fra Fee's dictator, Balisarius, plus even more movies. "We're cranking away, trying to figure out where the story goes and what else we would do," he says.

Right now, though, the reason why Team *Rebel Moon* is only getting a short break is because they're beaver away on the director's cuts of both movies, due to hit Netflix later this year, which will restore plenty of cut scenes, and add, promises Snyder, "all the gore and the hard R-ness and the nudity and the violence and crazy shit". Shot at the same time as the more family-friendly versions, the director is excited about unleashing his full vision. "They're insane," he laughs. "It'll be interesting to see what the [critics] say about the director's cuts. That's a different kettle of fish." Perhaps then he will be glued to RottenTomatoes.com, after all.

REBEL MOON — PART TWO: THE SCARGIVER WILL BE ON NETFLIX FROM 19 APRIL



DISSECTING A FAMOUS FAMILY'S MCU DEBUT

WE TAKE A MAGNIFYING GLASS TO THE FANTASTIC FOUR'S KITSCH CASTING ANNOUNCEMENT

1. THEY'RE EMBRACING HOMELIFE!

They're arriving late to the MCU, but to fans the Fantastic Four are known as 'Marvel's First Family'. It's not just because they're the characters who launched the Marvel Universe back in 1961 — they're also the first superhero team to share a bond on and off the battlefield. Here we have father figure/scientist Reed Richards (aka Mr Fantastic; to be played by Pedro Pascal), his light-bending wife Sue Storm (the Invisible Woman; Vanessa Kirby), her brother Johnny (the Human Torch; Joseph Quinn), who can project fire from his body, and Reed's best pal Ben Grimm (the Thing; Ebon Moss-Bachrach), a big human-rock hybrid.

2. IT HAS A '60S SETTING!

With their landmark place in Marvel history, and an origin tied to the Space Race, the Four have always felt at home in the '60s. Fans have long suspected their MCU debut might be a period piece, something this teaser might confirm. There are plenty of nods to the decade, from the retro fonts to a photo of Grimm posed like an Apollo astronaut. But whether this is really

a clue to the movie's setting or just a fun nod to their roots remains to be seen.

3. THERE'S A LIFE-SIZED CLUE?

One Easter egg might help narrow the year down even further: an issue of *Life* magazine from December 1963. Could this hint at the film's plot? '63 saw the FF encounter some major villains who would fit right in with Marvel's current plans. These include Rama-Tut, an ancient Egyptian variant of Kang, and Molecule Man, an über-powerful baddie who's a major player in the soon-to-be-adapted *Secret Wars* saga.

4. HI, H.E.R.B.I.E.!

The team's oft-forgotten robot sidekick H.E.R.B.I.E. is a surprise inclusion here, just as he was in 1978 when he debuted in the *Fantastic Four* cartoon series. Created for the show to replace the Human Torch, whose rights were tied up elsewhere, H.E.R.B.I.E. soon made his way to the comics, where he now serves as a babysitter for the Richards family. **SAM SUMMERS**

THE FANTASTIC FOUR IS IN CINEMAS FROM 25 JULY 2025

The Spotlight Nell Tiger Free

THE ACTOR ON HER PATH TO
HER DEBUT STARRING MOVIE
ROLE IN **THE FIRST OMEN**

WORDS **KATIE GOH**



MARCO VITTUR

NELL TIGER FREE became an actor to exorcise her energy. “I was driving my mother insane,” the English actor explains from her flat in South London. “I had way too much energy as an 11-year-old. So she took me to a Saturday club where I could run around and sing and dance and act.”

Twenty-four-year-old Free has directed all that energy into dark-natured, suspenseful projects, from working with directors like Nicolas Winding Refn on *Too Old To Die Young* and M. Night Shyamalan on *Servant* to her first starring film role in *The First Omen*, the prequel to Richard Donner’s 1976 classic. “There’s the wiggle room to have the most fun on projects like that,” she says of her tense, terrifying body of work. “You really send yourself into ridiculous situations; situations you’d never be in in day-to-day life. It’s really rewarding.”

Free’s love of all things scary began early — as a child she watched horror movies in 18-part YouTube clips — and her passion for what she saw encouraged her to pursue acting. Aged 14, Free signed with an agency and went along to her first audition. She nailed it, and was cast as Myrcella Baratheon in *Game Of Thrones*. “[That began] the trajectory,” Free explains. A domino effect ensued, as her performance in the show led to her being snapped up for Refn’s moody noir. “I couldn’t have played Leanne in *Servant* if I hadn’t done *Too Old To Die Young*, and I couldn’t have played Margaret in *The First Omen* if I hadn’t played Leanne before that.”

Servant proved a major breakthrough for Free, who starred in the show’s four seasons as a creepy live-in nanny with a shady cult background. It was a learning-on-the-job experience for the actor. “*Servant* felt like uni to me,” she reflects. “I didn’t go to drama school, so working on sets, under the watchful eye of these fantastic creatives, was a masterclass.”



Above and far right: Nell Tiger Free, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in London on 12 February 2024. Right: Unholy terror: As Margaret in *The First Omen*.



BETWEEN
SCENESOUR SPOTLIGHT
STAR'S FAVOURITE
STUFFTHE
PODCAST

CALL HER DADDY

"Should I lie? No, I'll be honest. I find it inspirational."

THE SHOW
GLEE

"Honestly, for the eighth time. I'm a big fat Gleeek and I'm proud of it."

THE ALBUM
IN YOUR HONOUR
BY FOO FIGHTERS

"I'm a big fan. Me and my dad have matching Foo Fighters tattoos."

THE BOOK
HOW TO KILL
YOUR FAMILY BYBELLA MACKIE
"It's not to pick up tips. I just think if one needs those weapons in one's arsenal, it's good to be informed."

Those lessons have led to *The First Omen*, which travels back to Rome in the '70s, before the events of the original film. Free plays an American woman who arrives in the city to become a nun, and whose faith is tested as she begins to unravel dark conspiracies in the church. She revisited both *The Omen* and its sequel as preparation. "I was really focused on the mythology of it when we started shooting and then as the shoot progressed," she explains. "I think what's cool about this movie is that it could be a stand-alone film, but it does slot nicely into the lore of *The Omen*."

The tale, directed by a female filmmaker, Arkasha Stevenson, gave Free a fresh perspective. She's happy to be part of a new wave of scary movies giving female characters more agency. "There was a time when women were used in horror films as bait; that feels so dated now," she observes. "Now it feels like women tend to be at the epicentre of these tales, and they're not just experiencing peril and fear but also combating it and overcoming it and solving the case 99 per cent of the time, which is very satisfying to see."

Free is in no rush to leave horror behind anytime soon; her next project, *Fall Into Darkness*, is set to be a cave-set survivalist movie about backpackers in the Dominican Republic. Yet she's excited to direct her abundance of energy to new projects and she's open to new acting ventures — even romcoms. "I'll give

it my best shot to not be terrifying."

THE FIRST OMEN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 5 APRIL

Make-up: Emma Day @ The Wall Group. Hair: Ken O'Rourke @ C/O Management using Hair by Sam McKnight. Styling: Emma Jade Morrison @ The Wall Group. Assisted by: Aurélie Mason-Perez. Suit: Loewe; Off-white blouse/shirt, The Row; Diamante loafers, Roger Vivier; Rings, Nell's own; Grey dress, Khaite. Additional imagery: Alamy, Mary Evans



Left: In Quiz Show. Below, top to bottom: Performing for daughter Cathy in *Campus* Code; Fishy business in *Shark Tale*; As van Gogh in *Dreams*.

MARTY'S METHOD

A MENTOR ROLE IN THE UPCOMING IN THE HAND OF DANTE IS THE LATEST IN SCORSESE'S ON-CAMERA FORAYS

DREAMS (1990)

ROLE: Vincent van Gogh, artist

SCREENTIME: Three minutes

MOST MEMORABLE LINE: "The sun, it compels me to paint! I can't stand here wasting my time talking to you!"

Two masters of cinema united for *Dreams*, directed by Akira Kurosawa. An art student encounters van Gogh, played by Scorsese. Kurosawa was nervous to cast him — he asked mutual friend Francis Ford Coppola if Scorsese would be insulted. Scorsese was equally anxious: "I was so nervous that I had to stop drinking coffee," he told *Empire* in 2019. Still, he stated, "You don't say no to Kurosawa," and flew to Japan the day after *GoodFellas* wrapped.

QUIZ SHOW (1994)

ROLE: Martin Rittenhome, CEO

SCREENTIME: Three minutes

MOST MEMORABLE LINE: "The audience didn't tune in to watch some amazing display of intellectual ability. They just wanted to watch the money."

The filmmaker got darker in Robert Redford's historical drama as the slippery head of the sponsor company of a rigged '50s TV quiz. Redford cast Scorsese because he fit the bill physically (the character was based on former Revlon president Charles Revson) and for his unique mannerisms. "[He] has his own personal style and delivery, so I found it interesting to have him play a tough character gently," said Redford.

SHARK TALE (2004)

ROLE: Sykes, fish

SCREENTIME: Ten minutes

MOST MEMORABLE LINE: "Who's your Puff Daddy? Who takes care of you, huh?"

Scorsese voicing a puffer fish in an animated Mafia kids' movie



may seem perplexing. But never underestimate the persuasive powers of Jeffrey Katzenberg, who twisted his arm. "I went to him one day and said, 'Marty, you have probably never realised this, but you speak in this incredibly unique way and it's actually pretty funny — funny in a good way,'" the DreamWorks Animation CEO recalled. "I finally showed him a picture of Sykes and he fell over laughing."

CAMPUS CODE (2015)

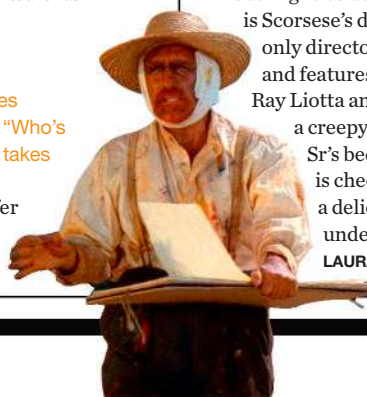
ROLE: Doctor

SCREENTIME: Two minutes

MOST MEMORABLE LINE: "[With an unsettling grin] 'Everything checks out.'"

This straight-to-streaming sci-fi is Scorsese's daughter Cathy's only directorial credit to date, and features cameos from Ray Liotta and her father as a creepy doctor. Scorsese Sr's bedside manner is cheery but with a deliciously sinister undertone. Be afraid.

LAURA VENNING



The order Cate Blanchett couldn't refuse

THE ACTOR ON HER PERSONAL JOURNEY
TO PLAYING A NUN IN THE NEW BOY

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

IN WARWICK THORNTON'S *The New Boy*, Cate Blanchett plays Sister Eileen, a nun in the Australia Outback who has secretly taken over a Catholic school after the death of a priest. When she takes in a First Nations boy (Aswan Reid), his non-Catholic spirituality threatens Sister Eileen's outlook. Blanchett, who also produced the film, explains what made this little movie so special.

SHE'S ALWAYS WANTED TO PLAY A NUN

"As a child, I came across this film with Hayley Mills [*The Trouble With Angels*]... as this really naughty renegade, expelled from every school, and she was sent to a convent," Blanchett says. "She became friends with a deeply religious girl... and at the end becomes an initiate. I was always in trouble, sent out into the corridor. At the age of eight I just completely fell into this film and thought, 'Wow, maybe that's my fate.'"

HER ROLE WAS GENDER-FLIPPED

When Blanchett and Thornton were discussing collaborating in some capacity, he showed her an unfinished script about a priest running a school for orphans. "I read it and said, 'This is incredible. I can help produce it but there's obviously nothing in it for me.'" It was Blanchett's husband and producing partner, Andrew

Upton, who suggested that they flipped the priest to a nun. "Suddenly the whole film opens up: You've got a nun officiating mass. A dead priest who hasn't been divulged. You create this hermetically sealed place of dark secrets — a metaphor for Australia in a lot of ways... Warwick just went, 'Ooooooooh.'"

IT'S ABOUT RELIGION VERSUS NATURE...

Blanchett's own relationship to religion was shaped by tragedy. "My father died when I was ten, which obviously left a massive void," she says. "My grandmother used to go to church and I would go with her every week in the hope that the hand of God would come down and say, 'Little girl, he's with me. He's having fun and he's safe. You'll see him again.' That didn't happen... So I rejected it and got on my bike every Sunday and rode out to the countryside. I connected more to nature."

... AND A DIFFICULT HISTORY

The film deals with the clash of First Nations people and white Christian culture. Blanchett describes the country's relationship to its history as "fraught. There's deep respect, I think, but profound guilt and shame. No positive decisions come out of guilt and shame."



Top to bottom: Sister Eileen (Cate Blanchett); Eileen with her new charge (Aswan Reid); The Sister gives refuge to the boy in her mission. **Below left:** Nick Cave.

THE SCORE'S BY AN AUSTRALIAN GREAT

When it came to finding someone to provide the film's music, Thornton and Blanchett didn't have to look far. "Nick Cave was my neighbour in Brighton," she says. Cave composed the score with long-time collaborator Warren Ellis. "The story is quite simple in a way and I think the poetry of it is brought out through their music."

THE NEW BOY IS IN CINEMAS FROM 15 MARCH

PUSHING LIMITS FOR LIKES

HOW ONLINE CONTENT CREATORS ARE GOING TO NEW LENGTHS AT HOLLYWOOD'S EXPENSE

AT THE PEOPLE'S Choice Awards in February, film stars were making the usual red-carpet rounds. Among them was *Barbie*'s America Ferrera, who was nominated for, and would later win, Movie Performance Of The Year. Pausing in front of TikTok celebrity interviewer Harry Daniels, her face twisted in confusion as she uncomfortably mused, "Oh my God. Both? I don't know," before being hurried away. The question? "Would you prefer a gay son or thot daughter?"

This intentionally provocative, somewhat baffling question ("thot", for those out of the loop, is a term used to describe sexually promiscuous women), is one of the latest examples of content creators pushing Hollywood's buttons in the name of engagement. Daniels is one of the more successful, garnering millions of likes on TikTok (69.5 million to date) for his red-carpet targeting of major-league talent. "Not you!" Oscar-nominated musician Billie Eilish shouted upon seeing him at the same awards, then walked away laughing as Daniels called after her. The short clip has been watched 23.1 million times.

A recent wave of TikTokers, meanwhile, are using a newly famous filming location to up their audience. After user Rhian Williams posted two



Left: YouTube prankster Lizwani on stage at the BAFTAs. Below: TikTok posts are getting more provocative to drive more views.

instructional videos on how to visit Drayton House — the grand estate used in *Saltburn* that cast and crew were forbidden from naming — creators flocked to the Northamptonshire location with phones poised. The persistent influencers made headlines when more than 50 ventured beyond the public footpath that runs through the estate onto private property to take photos and videos. "I never envisaged the amount of interest there would be. It's quite weird," owner Charles Stopford Sackville said of the intruders. "I don't take it as flattering."

In the case of Drayton House, Sackville has deployed staff to escort fans from the premises. But as YouTube prankster Lizwani proved by successfully gatecrashing the stage during Christopher Nolan and Emma Thomas' *Oppenheimer* Best Film win at the BAFTAs, it's not always that easy. Hollywood has reaped some serious rewards from social media; lest we



forget the time Martin Scorsese correctly explained what "threw shade" means on his daughter Francesca's TikTok account. But as long as creators continue to push and overstep boundaries, the future of the film industry's intersection with social-media personalities looks murkier than a tub of *Saltburn* bathwater.

BETH WEBB

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM EMPIRE

 BILL McCONKEY



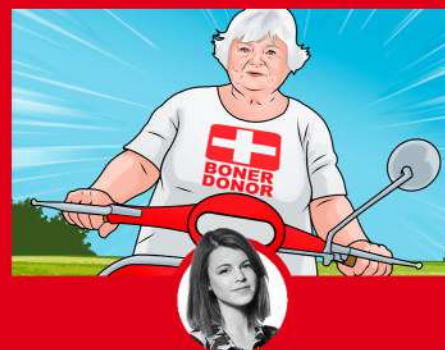
ALEX GODFREY IS THINKING ABOUT... ROYAL RUFUS SEWELL

I saw the photo of Rufus Sewell playing Prince Andrew, and I will never not see it. The actor plays him in Netflix's *Scoop*, but underneath the prosthetics, all I see is his soul trapped in the Duke's skull, like a Jordan Peele nightmare. Get out, Rufus!



SOPHIE BUTCHER IS THINKING ABOUT... ELLY'S CAT BACKPACK IN ARGYLLE

Forget the twisty plot — what's stuck with me about *Argylle* is Elly's adorable method of feline transport, complete with a window to admire your furry friend. If only my own cat wasn't so emotionally distant, this would be my must-have movie merch.



BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... JUNE SQUIBB: NONAGENARIAN LEGEND

Sure, Clint Eastwood is still making films at 93, but June Squibb just debuted her first major lead role in Sundance hit *Thelma* at 94 and earned raves for it. Plus, as *Hubie Halloween* proved, she can wear the hell out of a 'Boner Donor' T-shirt.



From Russia with love

EMPIRE CHECKS INTO HOTEL-SET HISTORICAL SERIES *A GENTLEMAN IN MOSCOW* WITH STARS EWAN MCGREGOR AND MARY ELIZABETH WINSTEAD

WORDS **BEN TRAVIS**

IN THE PIAZZA of the Hotel Metropol, Ewan McGregor and Mary Elizabeth Winstead are saying a touching goodbye. The lights are dimmed, a double bass twanging a bluesy shuffle, the hotel guests dancing casually. “Would you do me the honour of one last dance?” asks McGregor. The pair stand, embrace, sway. There are hushed whispers of travel documents, a declaration of love, a kiss — before Winstead wrenches herself away, not looking back as she strides towards the foyer, leaving McGregor stood alone.

And cut. This isn’t a surprisingly dramatic moment in McGregor and Winstead’s real-life

marriage that *Empire* has inadvertently stumbled upon — it’s a pivotal scene in upcoming Paramount+ drama *A Gentleman In Moscow*, a decades-spanning epic that intertwines romance and political intrigue against the backdrop of the Russian Revolution. Based on Amor Towles’ bestselling novel, it sees McGregor’s aristocratic Count Rostov spared the firing squad — instead sentenced to life imprisonment in the Metropol. Winstead’s film actress Anna Urbanova is one of many life-changing relationships the hotel offers him — and the pair’s off-screen chemistry is palpable as they replay their farewell multiple times over.

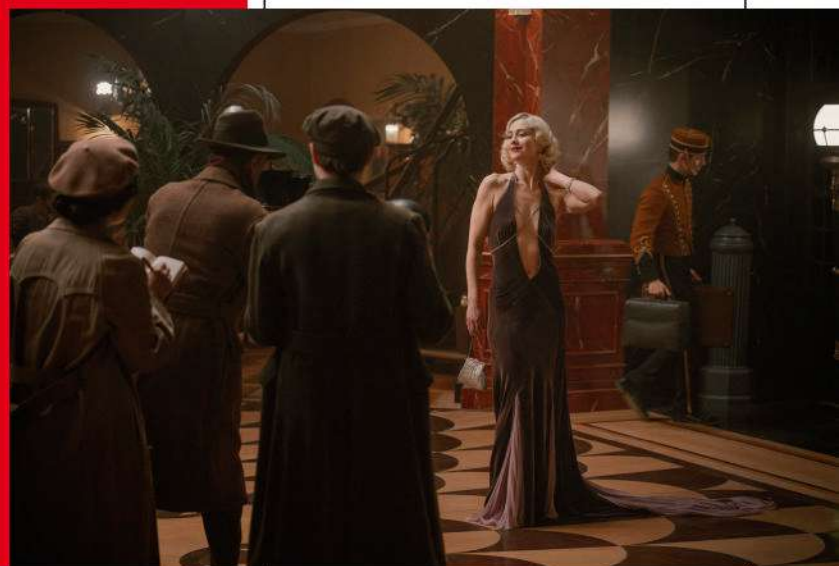
In his trailer later that day, scene firmly in the can, McGregor seems remarkably composed.

“It’s such a joy working with Mary that I could be doing it all day long,” he tells *Empire*. Months later, Winstead remembers it differently. “In-between takes we were just bawling our eyes out,” she chuckles. “It was so beautiful to get to play the scene and make that moment feel so real. But it was really, really hard for us as well.” Even the mere memory of playing it turns emotional. “For us, being real-life partners, saying goodbye to one another... I’m about to cry just talking about it,” she laughs, tearily. “It was the most emotional day. It’s so silly, I can’t even get through talking about it.”

Recreating the Moscow-bound Metropol in Manchester (Bolton doubled for the Bolshoi,



Clockwise from left: Russian aristocrat Count Alexander Rostov (Ewan McGregor) embraces actor Anna Urbanova (Mary Elizabeth Winstead); Rostov is spared the firing squad; Anna does her stuff; Meeting up with pal Osip (Johnny Harris); McGregor on set with director Sam Miller; Another friend to Rostov, Nina (Alexa Goodall), as a young girl.



while the Kremlin scenes shot in, er, Leeds), the soundstage of Space Studios hosts a sprawling purpose-built hotel — *Empire* walks through its front doors, past reception, through the foyer, beyond the bar, up the stairs, and back down to the restaurant and piazza. It's a vast creation befitting the scope of the story. "I love the old-fashioned nature of the drama," says McGregor, who also produces, having loved Towles' book (he recalls "the prevailing dread" he felt at turning its last page; he coped by immediately buying *War & Peace*).

"Old-fashioned" and "epic" are words that arise too for Winstead, the breadth of the drama encompassing all elements of a life. "These characters are going through these very universal struggles at a time that was very dark — they're finding hope and humanity in that darkness, and lightness and joy," she says. Director Sam Miller promises a "multifaceted tonal range" to the show. "It's got strong magical elements and childlike elements at play," he tells *Empire* between takes, "as well as the heaviness of what's happening."

While the Count is transformed by his on-off relationship with Anna ("There's quite a lot of cold-shoulder in the early days," laughs McGregor. "It was so funny being snubbed by her") and becoming a father-figure to multiple

children in the hotel, Russia transforms outside the Metropol's windows. "It's about the making of the Russia that we know now," states McGregor. "It starts in 1921 after the Revolution, and everybody's in turmoil. There's a lot of discussion about belief in something — people who believe in the Communist movement and people who don't, and what it does to their lives."

The personal relationships anchor it, though. "Anna is a very modern woman. And the Count is a very un-modern man," McGregor explains. "Years and years go by, and you can never really pin down what this relationship is. But of course, it turns into the greatest love of either of their lives." While the pair channelled their real-life partnership into the show, they took a little something home in return. "We bought a house in Scotland, and we were furnishing it at the time," says Winstead. "Everywhere [on set] was inspiration. 'Wow, that chair would look great. That wallpaper's amazing!' We took a ton of inspiration — and maybe even kept a few pieces of furniture. Just for, you know, posterity's sake." All's fair in love and war.

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Ben Mendelsohn

THE AUSTRALIAN STAR GETS TEARY OVER OUR LANDMARK LACTOSE QUESTIONNAIRE

WORDS HAYLEY CAMPBELL



Whose poster was on your wall as a kid?

Paul Stanley. ABBA was my first concert, but KISS were the posters. It was a great poster. You could just get lost looking at it because he had such a man/woman thing going on. It was a beautiful shot. He wasn't even my favourite — Gene Simmons was my favourite from the band — but that fuckin' poster of Paul Stanley? Unbelievable.

Do you have any scars?

Which ones, the inside or the outside ones? Covered in 'em! I have little scars here, there and everywhere from this and that. Inside? From life. Doesn't everyone? You can't get to the age where you're approaching venerable and not clock a scar or two. They're there for a damn good reason.

How much is a pint of milk?

Is it about a quid ten? [It's 90p.] Well, I drink fancypants milk, so there you go. I drink the most expensive one you can get at any shop. That's my basic rule now that I'm rich. Anytime I go into any shop, I will — by default — buy the most expensive version of whatever is there. I'm having Ovaltine with mine.

If you weren't an actor, what would your dream job be?

I'd be James Bond. I'd be a spy. I've never given up that fantasy.

What's the most disgusting thing you've ever eaten?

It was in the late '80s. Someone cooked up this



vegan coriander dish, but they cooked the coriander in the lentils. This was this hippy cult kind of group, and this coriander thing was just the most disgusting thing I have ever had in my life.

What is one thing you do better than anyone else you know?

I can't tell you. I mean, I literally can't tell you. It's a proximity thing so I can't tell you... Alright, well, if you want the G-rated version: I'm an expert backgammon player. I'll play people for money, but you're giving it away.

What's the worst job you've ever had?

Joan Crawford! I'm quoting [comedy duo] Derek and Clive — that will be known only to a certain section of the community. The worst job I ever had in real life was in an abattoir. That was really tough. There are two jobs to be done: one is to take a sample for tuberculosis, the other is to read the tag number on the tail to match. So there's one person below, one up top. If you're up top — and this nearly happened to me — you can get your head kicked right off. You can be killed up there. And down below you get completely covered in shit.

When were you last naked outdoors?

Last week in Brazil. I mean, why not? No-one knew me. I had to run from one place to another. Just a couple of doors down, so it was a quick run. It was around 9pm so there were probably only 15 people or so around. I didn't stroll. I was as polite as I could be.

What's the worst smell in the world?

Ammonia. Really strong ammonia. I copped that as a kid in Dad's lab [where he was a medical-research scientist]. I was opening the bottle and he said, "You won't like that!" and I just [*mimes taking a big sniff*]. That said, I think halitosis is more problematic than BO, especially if people don't know about it, and invariably people with bad halitosis don't know about it.

Do you have a nickname?

Most Australians call me Mendo. You know, that's how we do it — we don't want to say anything long. It's gotta be a "Y", an "O", or perhaps an "A". And you can't be called Mendy. Menda? Nah. Mendo. I used to run out on set as a young thing and go, "MENDO POWER!!!"

What's your favourite sandwich?

Ham and salad is just a fuckin' genius sandwich. Vegemite is high up there, but that's more toast.

What film makes you cry?

I will cry at the drop of a hat. Pixar's *Coco* made me cry. *Coco* is beautiful. One of the best things about movies is you get to have that feeling where everything is alright again. All the things that you think are broken, and everyone that you think thinks shit about you, and then it slips, and you're okay? That always kills me. God, look — [*Mendo is tearing up*] — it's happening now!

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reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

14 MARCH-10 APRIL 2024 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★
EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES





Left: The Shai-Hulud. **Top to bottom:** Bene Gesserit Princess Irulan (Florence Pugh); Chani (Zendaya) and Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet); Villain Feyd-Rautha (Austin Butler).

KEEP 'EM PEELED

The gladiator battle with Austin Butler's Feyd-Rautha was shot by cinematographer Greig Fraser using IMAX cameras with infrared lenses, in order to depict a world almost entirely without colour — under a “black sun”.

FILM

DUNE: PART TWO

SANDWORM POPCORN BUCKETS AT THE READY

★★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 12A / 167 MINS

DIRECTOR Denis Villeneuve

CAST Timothée Chalamet, Zendaya, Rebecca Ferguson, Javier Bardem, Austin Butler, Josh Brolin, Florence Pugh, Christopher Walken, Stellan Skarsgård

PLOT On the planet Arrakis, Paul Atreides (Chalamet) joins the native Fremen people and plots revenge on the Harkonnens. But terrible visions tease a dire future.

YOU SENSE THAT Denis Villeneuve has been having Spice-fuelled visions his entire life. The filmmaker has spoken much of how reading Frank Herbert's *Dune* at an early age cracked his mind wide open. Bringing the sci-fi tome's heady mix of warring houses, psychedelic reveries, anti-colonialist themes and intergalactic action to the screen is, in a very real way, his life's work. And once again, in *Dune: Part Two*, it seems the images Herbert conjured in Villeneuve's head all those years ago are being ripped straight from synapse to screen.

That *Part Two* arrives at all is something of a miracle. The filmmaker gambled on a two-part adaptation of the book, despite a sequel not being guaranteed — and the astonishing first part (by Villeneuve's own admission, a place-setter to be paid off in later instalments) arrived in the midst of Covid. *Part Two*, as promised, is the war epic: a weightier, more muscular chapter with less world-building to do, but knottier narrative beats to untangle.

It picks up shortly after *Part One*'s end (a rewatch is advised, though Florence Pugh's incoming Princess Irulan functions largely as a recap-voiceover), with Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) and his pregnant mother Lady Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) being accepted into the Fremen, the native people of bone-dry Arrakis. Paul, having escaped the massacre of House Atreides by the brutal Harkonnens — as machinated by Emperor Shaddam IV, a disappointingly well-behaved Christopher Walken — desires revenge on all who wronged him. Many Fremen — including leader Stilgar (Javier Bardem) — think Paul could be the 'Lisan al-Gaib', a prophet in their religion; except, those prophecies were intentionally laid down by space-witch meddlers the Bene Gesserit (of which Paul's mother Jessica is one), and Paul's Spice-visions show him possible futures where leaning into his engineered messianic 'destiny' results in endless bloodshed. Meanwhile, Paul falls for Fremen warrior Chani (Zendaya), their budding romance

complicated by... well, all the above factors.

In short, there are plenty of plates spinning — and for the most part, Villeneuve displays remarkable control over them all. Beyond that, he marshals staggering sequences to blow you to the back of your seat: an opening attack from gravity-defying Harkonnen warriors is hair-raising stuff; a ragtag rocket-launch mission with Paul and Chani taking down enemy ornithopters is breathlessly exciting; Paul's long-awaited first sandworm ride is an overwhelming feat of sound and vision, with thunderous bass that'll turn any regular cinema into a seat-shaking 4DX experience. And Austin Butler is the MVP of the newbies, his Harkonnen warrior-boy Feyd-Rautha (in every sense the Anti-Paul) a hairless embodiment of utter inhumanity. His stark arena battle on a distant planet — rendered entirely monochrome under a black sun that leeches all colour, the sky exploding in Rorschach blotches — is a welcome reprieve from the largely Arrakis-set action.

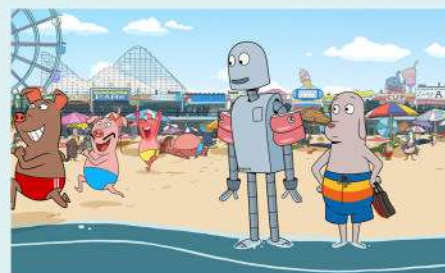
In case *Part One* didn't make it clear enough, this is Middle-earthian in ambition, Nolan-esque in the dramatic intensity of its execution. If anything, *Part Two* is almost epic to a fault. It is a gigantic film, and for all the character work Villeneuve beds in (Paul's naming ceremony; the most sand-based flirting in a space opera since, well, another famous *Episode II*), there's a point where non-stop immensity takes over. It reaches a terminal velocity of grandiosity, a critical massiveness — and just keeps going. Despite the two-film split, there's considerable ground to cover, with mystical plot-points that even Villeneuve struggles to wrangle. The character throughlines are forced to reckon with central figures who — through narrative necessity — become less human as the film progresses. Those who haven't fully imbibed the *Water Of Life* might feel overcome by 'epic fatigue' come the credits.

Even then, the story isn't over. While *Part Two* reaches the conclusion of Herbert's first book, this is decidedly *not* the end of Villeneuve's adaptation. Should the mooted *Part Three* — covering sequel novel *Dune Messiah* — be greenlit, it won't be an optional coda, but a proper trilogy-closer. As such, this is firmly a middle chapter, with major threads yet to resolve.

It feels churlish to complain, given the incredible achievements on display here — uninhibited ambition from Villeneuve, more eye-melting cinematography from Greig Fraser, fresh Hans Zimmer jams (a dark inversion of Paul's theme; a booming anthem for Feyd-Rautha), and a plot thread involving a psychic fetus. Oh, and yes, Gurney Halleck (Josh Brolin) gets a brief Baliset banger (sample lyric: "His stillsuit is full of piss..."). You might feel somewhat sandblasted by the end — but overall, it remains a remarkable display of desert power. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT Another epic helping of sci-fi wildness from Denis Villeneuve that'll take true believers to paradise — even if it's a bit too much Spice to digest in one sitting.

Clockwise from main:
It takes more than
a penalty fare to scare
Robot; Who didn't love
a trip to the Woolworth's
photo booth?; Hog — if
not Dog — heaven.



FILM

ROBOT DREAMS

IF A MACHINE CAN LEARN THE VALUE OF DOG LIFE, MAYBE WE CAN TOO



OUT 22 MARCH / CERT PG / 102 MINS

DIRECTOR Pablo Berger

CAST Ivan Labanda, Albert Trifol Segarra, Rafa Calvo, José García Tos, José Luis Mediavilla

PLOT In a 1980s New York populated by animals, a lonely dog orders a companion robot. But a day at the beach ends with disaster.

IT MAY COME as a surprise to find that one of the most achingly beautiful stories of love and loss that you'll see this — or any — year involves a dog, a robot, and a bit of rust. *Robot Dreams* is a film based on the enchanting 2007 graphic novel by Sara Varon, given new life for the big screen in glorious 2D animation by Pablo Berger. Like its source, it's told wordlessly but is full of incident, imagination and, above all, emotion.

The opening shot shows the Twin Towers

rising over a gloomy but animal-populated New York in the early 1980s: think *Zootropolis* without the Disney stylings. A lonely dog microwaves his evening meal and envies his coupled-up neighbours. Inspiration strikes when he sees an advert for an 'Amica 2000' robot, which he orders and builds into a new and loyal friend. Cue a montage straight from a romcom, as Robot gets to delight in the world for the first time and Dog is emboldened by his new friend to go out and live his life.

But when they head to Coney Island for a day at the beach, Robot is rusted into immobility and proves too heavy for Dog to shift alone. When he gets back with some tools, the beach is locked up for the season and, despite repeated attempts, he can't get to Robot. The friends must endure a long separation, imagining their reunion but also dreading life alone.

What follows are imaginative flights of fancy as they wait the long months for the beach to reopen, as well as moments of despair and danger. But there are soaring grace notes too, in the wittiest bowling scene ever committed to film and a Busby Berkeley-style musical number in the world of *The Wizard Of Oz*. Robot fears that Dog will replace him; Dog looks for Robot in every caller to his door.

It creates a thoughtful, elegiac tone that fits unexpectedly well with the childishly bold design. The 2D animation is simple but not simplistic, colourful but never garish, and Berger ensures that the city teems with interesting characters as the background to the two isolated, silent leads. The director, who worked in silent film before with 2012's *Blancanieves*, fills his screen with gently clever touches — like Dog stripping off his swimming shorts coyly under a towel, but then not replacing them with anything else, or the way his tail wags when he's really happy.

As the odds of our heroes reuniting grow longer, the yearning for their lost love — platonic though it may have been — becomes overwhelmingly emotional. It becomes a personal, deeply felt reminder of how fragile, and how important, our connections really are. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT Who needs humans? This is visual storytelling at its finest, a traditional animation of gentle, unshowy genius. Sometimes the very best love stories go deeper than words can say.

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Clockwise from main:

Pitch perfect — Cate

Blanchett; Aswan Reid

as the boy; On a mission.



FILM

THE NEW BOY

CATE BLANCHETT RETURNS TO OZ

★★★

OUT 15 MARCH / CERT 15 / 96 MINS

DIRECTOR Warwick Thornton

CAST Cate Blanchett, Aswan Reid, Deborah Mailman, Wayne Blair

PLOT Australia, the 1940s. A boy (Reid) is taken from the Outback to live in a Catholic orphanage — where his healing powers shock Sister Eileen (Blanchett).

AS AN AUSTRALIAN Aboriginal child, Warwick Thornton was sent to a Christian boarding school, run by monks and nuns. That formative experience inspired *The New Boy*, the filmmaker's seventh feature — but don't expect a straightforward slice of direct autobiography. It is a curious confection, with a tone that flits between a serious study of colonialism and religion, and something more fantastical or supernatural. It even has an unexpected *Weekend At Bernie's*-esque subplot. And it isn't the sort of film to leave you with easy answers.

Cate Blanchett — in her first Australian role in several years — plays Sister Eileen, the leader of a Catholic mission in Australia's Northern Territory. After the supreme, overbearing

confidence of her performance in 2022's *TÁR*, there's a fascinating nervous energy to Eileen: seemingly as fearful of her faith as she is beholden to it. She is naive and misguided but also quietly cunning, signing letters of official business 'Don Peter', after the now-dead patriarch of the mission, and pretends to be him for the benefit of delivery men. Even when the character feels occasionally underwritten, Blanchett is — of course — never less than compelling.

The nuns' mission's delicate equilibrium is thrown off-balance when the unnamed new boy arrives, and Thornton conjures a wonderfully unguarded performance out of newcomer Aswan Reid, who moves about the world as scruffily and messily as his curly blond locks. He is a ball of energy and innocence, and the film plays through his lively eyes, almost as if it's an unorthodox coming-of-age story. A magical spark of light follows the new boy, implying healing powers, with a lens flare that recalls a 1980s Amblin adventure; elsewhere, Thornton's camera feels almost Terrence Malick-ian, taking full advantage of the dusty desert sunrises.

There is a deep, abiding spirituality to the film, and Thornton seems to draw a line of comparison between Christian mysticism and the Earth-centred 'geosophical' Aboriginal belief systems: are the two traditions not so different, after all? Or are they wholly incompatible? It's not clear what position the film is taking, an ambiguity that can feel confounding. Instead, Thornton luxuriates



in studious, slow-burn pacing, too often seemingly just treading water.

What feels clear, though, is the deliberate setting of this tale in time and place. It is a deeply Australian story, rooted in its shameful history (the new boy is snatched against his will, a symptom of the country's racist assimilation laws) and the eventual imposition of a Western name on him feels symbolic, the loss of innocence and identity. *The New Boy's* ruminations don't always connect, but it does make us wonder whose souls really need saving.

JOHN NUGENT

VERDICT A gentle, odd little Australian fable. Warwick Thornton's film has a lot of thoughts to process, and while they don't always cohere, the performances from Blanchett and Reid keep it interesting.



DAGR

★★★★

OUT 8 APRIL / CERT 15 / 77 MINS

DIRECTOR Matthew Butler-Hart

CAST Ellie Duckles, Riz Moritz, Matt Barber, Tori Butler-Hart

Social-media pranksters Thea (Ellie Duckles) and Louise (Riz Moritz) plan to sabotage “a wanky commercial shoot” in an isolated Welsh mansion. Disguised as caterers, they arrive just as the ad crew are assailed by a curse and aren’t sure whether they’re being counter-pranked or primed for sacrifice. Moritz and Duckles get comedy mileage as urban dimwits alternately cooing over cows and creeped out by crows before being menaced by robed cultists and demonic forces. Matthew Butler-Hart’s iPhone-shot found-footage film isn’t groundbreaking, but is expertly assembled — with faces-to-watch leads and enough nicely timed scares to deliver chills. It also wins points for coming in at a tight, no-shot-wasted 77 minutes. **KN**



EVIL DOES NOT EXIST

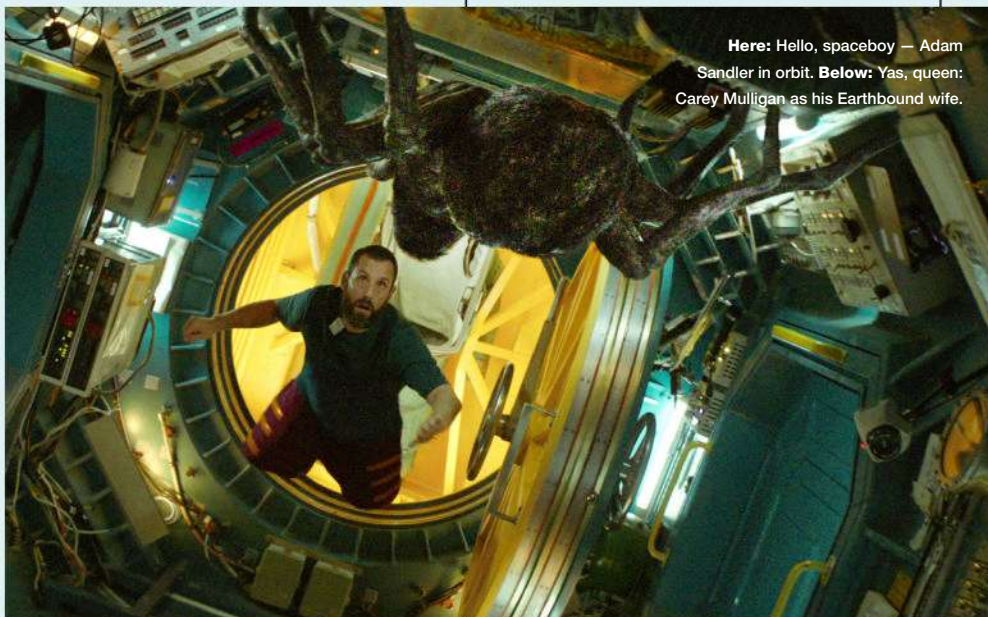
★★★★

OUT 5 APRIL / CERT TBC / 105 MINS

DIRECTOR Ryusuke Hamaguchi

CAST Hitoshi Omika, Ryuji Kosaka, Ayaka Shibutani, Ryo Nishikawa

Not much seems to happen in the opening section of *Evil Does Not Exist*; we’re simply watching the everyday goings-on of a small community in the snowy woodlands of Japan. But half an hour in, the film snaps sharply into focus: at a town-hall meeting, two corporate spokespeople lay out their boss’ business proposal of a glamping site in the woods. The idea is met with fierce resistance by the local attendees. But what seems to be a film about the rural/urban divide and the wanton spoliation of nature becomes something rather more mysterious, culminating in director Hamaguchi’s most unexpected, opaque and downright brutal finale to date. Evil may or may not exist, but ambiguity in cinema is still gloriously alive. **AS**



Here: Hello, spaceboy — Adam Sandler in orbit. Below: Yes, queen: Carey Mulligan as his Earthbound wife.

FILM

SPACEMAN

THE SANDMAN GOES TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

★★★★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / CERT 15 / 107 MINS

DIRECTOR Johan Renck

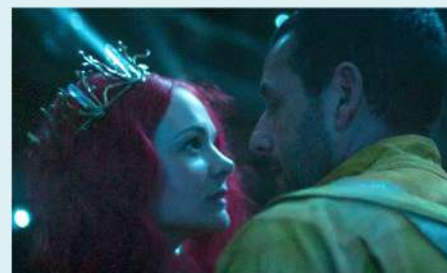
CAST Adam Sandler, Carey Mulligan, Paul Dano, Isabella Rossellini

PLOT Astronaut Jakub (Sandler) realises his marriage to Lenka (Mulligan) is on the fritz. Luckily, an alien spider (voiced by Dano) is on hand to help.

THE OCCASIONALLY SPOTTY quality of his filmography means it’s easy to forget that Adam Sandler is one of the most talented actors of his generation. Though there have been some dramatic turns over the years, Sandler is first and foremost a comedian, the mind behind some genuinely hilarious comic classics. There’s none of that signature humour in his latest film, which sees the Sandman morph into the Spaceman, the titular Czech cosmonaut of *Chernobyl* director Johan Renck’s sci-fi drama. It’s a tale about love, loneliness and connection that is by turns weird, introspective, and beautiful.

Adapted from Jaroslav Kalfar’s book *Spaceman Of Bohemia*, Colby Day’s screenplay is one part space sci-fi — Sandler’s astronaut is on his way to Jupiter to investigate the mysterious ‘Chopra cloud’ — and one part relationship drama, as Jakub realises that his marriage to his pregnant wife Lenka (Carey Mulligan) back on Earth is crumbling. The link between the two elements is Hanuš (voiced by Paul Dano), a hairy, Labrador-sized spider, stowed away on the ship. Studying Jakub’s memories in a bid to better understand humans, he offers some unsolicited relationship advice along the way.

Hanuš’ first appearance is unsettling, but his presence quickly becomes a consistent, endearing highlight. *Spaceman*’s default setting is



gloomy, but what little humour there is comes courtesy of the wise extra-terrestrial. His penchant for calling Jakub “skinny human”, along with his discovery of chocolate, are both chuckle-worthy, and Dano adds subtle vocal inflections to his calm demeanour when the moment suits. By the time the film concludes, you’ll wish he was your unofficial therapist, too.

Jakub certainly needs to confront some hard truths. At the movie’s outset, he’s an unlikeable mixture of self-involved and withdrawn. It takes Hanuš’ probing for Jakub to acknowledge the root causes of his trauma, and come to appreciate what truly matters. A hug between the two slowly bonding friends is the movie’s high point, a perfect blend of storytelling and craft that belies its bizarre sci-fi trappings. It’s greatly aided by Max Richter’s score: for much of the movie it’s ominous, bubbling away under the surface, but when it comes to the fore in that pivotal moment of realisation, it’s ethereal and stirring, a rich mix of glorious synths and swirling strings.

In spite of Jakub’s unappealing qualities, he manages to be sympathetic thanks to Sandler’s restrained, well-measured performance. And though Lenka is underwritten, Mulligan gives her character much-needed interiority and agency, a steady drip of flashbacks and scenes set on Earth illuminating how the star-crossed lovers reached this point. Distance may have strained their relationship, but the hopeful ending is well-earned. **AMON WARMANN**

VERDICT Come for the wise alien spider, stay for Adam Sandler at his sombre best in this strange, heartfelt sci-fi drama. Here’s hoping he continues to push himself to new highs.

Doing it by the book:
Yang Hewen as Bai Mulin
and Zine Tseng as
young Ye Wenjie.



WATCH FIRST

Liu Cixin's novel has already been adapted in his native China as *Three-Body*, released in early 2023. The first season is available on Prime Video; a second season is currently in production.

TV

3 BODY PROBLEM

THE *GAME OF THRONES* TEAM
SWAP DRAGONS FOR MULTI-
DIMENSIONAL ALIENS

★★★★★

OUT 21 MARCH (NETFLIX) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8

SHOWRUNNERS David Benioff, D.B. Weiss,
Alexander Woo

CAST Benedict Wong, Liam Cunningham,
Jonathan Pryce, Jess Hong, Jovan Adepo, Eiza
González, John Bradley, Alex Sharp

PLOT Detective Da Shi (Wong) investigates
a series of mysterious deaths in the scientific
community. Could they possibly be linked to an
alien invasion?

IN PHYSICS, THE 'three-body problem' is what
you'd call a real head-scratcher: a scientific
conundrum to do with the positions and
velocities of three bodies of mass when they
attract each other with gravity. It is a centuries-
old question of chaos theory; a mathematical
riddle, seemingly unsolvable. And only slightly

trickier than adapting Liu Cixin's 2008 novel, *The
Three-Body Problem*, for the small screen. The
book (and its subsequent sequels) spans from
history to the heat death of the universe; includes
dense talk of theoretical astrophysics; and is
set, at one point, in the tenth dimension. How,
exactly, do you make a television show out of *that*?

"Ambitious" doesn't quite cut it, which
perhaps makes *Game Of Thrones* showrunners
David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, alongside *True
Blood*'s Alexander Woo, the ideal stewards
for Netflix's massive, multi-million-dollar
punt. The three creators are experienced with
giant budgets; they know their way around
a jaw-dropping set-piece; they can wrestle with
sprawling, unwieldy source material; they can
world-build; they can character-build. To
borrow a phrase, they consider chaos a ladder.
(After the decidedly mixed response to the final
season of *Game Of Thrones*, Benioff and Weiss
also, arguably, have something to prove.)

In many ways, this is a remarkable shift
from *Thrones* or *Blood*. There is so much
packed into these eight episodes, so many
tones and styles and genres. It is part police-
procedural potboiler, part historical-fiction
epic, part puzzle-box mystery, part scientific-
discovery adventure, part alien-invasion
sci-fi. It begins with a series of scientists' deaths,
seemingly connected, being investigated by

laconic, Raymond Chandler-
esque detective Da Shi (brilliantly
refashioned as a swearsy
Mancunian by Benedict Wong);
it ends with the dawn of an
intergalactic war. That it feels
coherent at all is an achievement. At
its heart lies the question of what it
means to be human.

The grounding of that question is one of
the showrunners' biggest contributions. Liu's
book was more enamoured with its concepts
than its characters; this adaptation streamlines,
combines or invents five major characters —
played by Jess Hong, Jovan Adepo, Eiza
González, John Bradley and Alex Sharp — to
be all from the same Oxford graduating class.
As long as you accept the slightly convenient
neatness of that choice, they're strong
audience surrogates, lending a human sense
of incredulity to it all. ("That is about the
28th-weirdest thing to happen to me this
week," says Hong's Jin Cheng at one point.)
Some of the relationships feel a bit trite —
a love triangle seems unnecessarily soapy and
small-fry — but there are moments of real
pathos. (Hong and Sharp emerge as the
MVPs, both delivering warm, gorgeously pitched
performances, full of humour and humility.)

The result is something more accessible



Top to bottom: Auggie (Eiza González), Jin (Jess Hong), Raj (Saamer Usmani), Saul (Jovan Adepo) and Will (Alex Sharp); Vera (Vedette Lim) gets elevated; "Is it a bird? Is it a plane?"

than the book — you don't need a PhD to understand or enjoy this show — even as it centres incredibly smart people trading in high-concept problem-solving while playing on alien Apple Vision Pros. Yet Liu's most important themes can still be found. This is an English-language, international adaptation of a Chinese book, but it retains its social and historical allegories: the show, like the book, opens with the violence of China's Cultural Revolution, and we are invited to draw comparisons between human and alien power structures — the spectre of an oppressive regime, the terrifying deference to a cult of personality, the forging of a new world at whatever cost.

It doesn't skimp on the book's wow factor, either. There is a colossal sense of scale and pace throughout. Episode 5, in particular, has a sequence which rivals the Red Wedding for its violence and gore. This initial season follows a familiar *Thrones*-ian pattern, frontloading its big moments while ending things on a more reflective note.

Almost disappointingly, that finale feels more muted, offering some answers but far more questions, laying groundwork for currently unconfirmed future seasons. There is huge potential here. If they pull it off, this could be one of the great science-fiction television shows of all time. But they need to land the plane first. Netflix, we beg you: don't leave us hanging. Don't make this just another unsolvable problem. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT A hugely ambitious adaptation of a hugely ambitious book. As an opening season it feels like set-up for something bigger — but what's here is thoroughly impressive, giant-scale television.



Madame Web/Cassie (Dakota Johnson, second left) with her spidey mates. **Below:** Supervillain Ezekiel Sims (Tahar Rahim).

FILM

MADAME WEB

IN THE END, HER WEB DIDN'T QUITE CONNECT US ALL



OUT NOW / CERT 12A / 116 MINS

DIRECTOR S.J. Clarkson

CAST Dakota Johnson, Sydney Sweeney, Isabela Merced, Adam Scott, Zosia Mamet, Celeste O'Connor

PLOT Cassie Web (Johnson) is just an ordinary ambulance driver — until one day, a near-death experience awakens dormant psychic powers.

EARLY ON IN *Madame Web* — the latest superhero film to be based on a *Spider-Man*-adjacent comic series — Dakota Johnson's Cassie Web rejects a thank-you gift from the child of a woman whose life she just saved. From this, you can probably surmise that firstly, she's awkward around kids, and secondly, she will eventually end up having to protect some kids. Like many heavily telegraphed moments in this film, you won't need psychic powers to figure that one out — even if Cassie herself does, in fact, shortly develop such powers.

But if you did have psychic powers, you might have wanted to use them to gently warn the cast away from this film, which manages to be both over-written and underwritten at the same time. Most of the actors here are wonderfully talented, but there's only so much they can do with the material. *A Prophet's* Tahar Rahim, so often a blistering presence, is left to thankless grumpy-villain duties here; Adam Scott, fresh off his unimprovable turn in *Severance*, takes on a curious incarnation of Spidey's Uncle Ben; Sydney Sweeney, Isabela Merced and Celeste O'Connor, as Spider-Women, have very little to do.

There is, perhaps, a bit less digital mulch sloshing around in *Madame Web* than in



some recent superhero films. This is the result of a smaller and more self-contained story, involving the kind of nifty time-loop dilemmas familiar from small-screen sci-fi. But where the dialogue needed wit and spark, it has the kind of will-this-do? one-liners ("Hope the spiders were worth it, Mom!") and tired backstories you get when the characters are too flat to flesh out with rounded personalities. (Some unconvincing ADR smacks of a last-minute attempt to fix things in the edit.)

Like the last remnants of a lost civilisation poking through the wreckage of a post-apocalyptic wasteland, hints of classical storytelling survive. The fateful legacy of a birthright inherited from a dead parent gives Cassie's arc a Freudian motif, while the villain attempting to wipe out the next generation due to a premonition that they will cause his own downfall is a more interesting and personal motivation — at least on the page — than another bad guy wanting to destroy the universe. And instead of Chekhov's gun, we get a new twist on an old favourite in the form of 'Chekhov's CPR'. It's not enough to offset the creeping sense that, when it comes to the franchise sometimes known as the Sony Pictures Universe of Marvel Characters (SPUMC), the word "Marvel" is synonymous less with a sense of awe than with a shrug.

CATHERINE BRAY

VERDICT *Madame Web* isn't much worse than the rest of the SPUMC, give or take, but it's not really better, either. Its minimal saving grace is that it doesn't require much familiarity with the wider universe.



Here: Space cadet — Noomi Rapace as astronaut Jo. Below: Life on Earth.

TV

CONSTELLATION

NOOMI RAPACE GOES TO NOOMI RA-SPACE

★★★★★

OUT NOW (APPLE TV+) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8

SHOWRUNNER Peter Harness

CAST Noomi Rapace, Jonathan Banks, Davina Coleman, Rosie Coleman, James D'Arcy

PLOT Astronaut Jo Ericsson (Rapace) returns to Earth — but her life does not appear to be the same one she left behind.

QUANTUM SUPERPOSITION, EXPLAINS Jonathan Banks' scientist in Apple's *Constellation*, is the ability of something to exist in two conflicting states at the same time, until directly observed. Likewise, the series is simultaneously a gripping, precision-tooled psychological thriller and a confusing, languorously paced sci-fi yarn, depending entirely upon which episode you're seeing it from.

We join Swedish astronaut Jo Ericsson (Noomi Rapace) aboard the ISS in the middle of a year-long shift away from her husband Magnus (James D'Arcy) and her daughter Alice (played by twins Davina and Rosie Coleman). When a sudden collision causes havoc, Jo must repair the damaged module in order to make her way back to Earth before running out of air.

But, in sequences that tip their space helmet to *Event Horizon* as much as *Gravity*, those final hours in space are punctuated by sinister hallucinations: her daughter in a blizzard-whipped cabin, an ominous cupboard door. It's not until Jo is back on terra firma in Episode 3, though, that the show's central premise begins to assert itself. Her car, once red, is now blue; her daughter no longer speaks her native Swedish; and her once happy marriage now feels strained. Meanwhile, her account of the collision (involving the desiccated corpse of a long-dead Russian cosmonaut) is dismissed out of hand in



a maddening display of institutional gaslighting.

All of this plays out amid a series of fractured moments that seem to conform only loosely to the concept of linear time. It's a disorienting, elliptical mode of storytelling that blends actual flashbacks (and forwards, and sideways) with seeming hallucinations — rarely bothering to distinguish between the two. The dread-laden atmosphere ensures we're rarely bored, but we're also left perpetually grasping for narrative threads that remain maddeningly out of reach. Right up until everything clicks into place.

Early episodes might give the impression of a story adrift, but writer Peter Harness knows exactly what he's doing. The eureka moment, when it comes, is a stunning, Damascene revelation that sends domino-like ripples back to the show's very first scene, instantly making sense of what came before. It's a risky move but one that pays off, resulting in a heady rush that is absolutely worth the wait. It just takes a handful of episodes to get there.

Rapace keeps a tight hold on us throughout, her performance a ball of frenzied confusion and barely contained panic. But it's the Coleman sisters who truly shine, lending Alice a heart-rending aura of bone-deep grief and a wisdom far beyond her years. Amid all the quantum entanglements and fracturing realities, *Constellation's* core is the relationship between those two characters. A mother-daughter bond that transcends time, reality and the spaces in-between. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT Initially baffling, occasionally maddening, but ultimately brilliant. This thoughtful, brain-bending sci-fi thriller is absolutely worth persevering with.



OUT OF DARKNESS

★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 87 MINS

DIRECTOR Andrew Cumming

CAST Safia Oakley-Green, Chuku Modu, Kit Young, Lola Evans

In 43,000 BC, a group of prehistoric humans, led by alpha male Adem (Chuku Modu), arrive in a new land and soon sense a sinister presence hunting them. Filmed in the Scottish Highlands, this slowly ticks the survival-horror checklist, as characters make their case to be the next on the chopping block. There's plenty of blood, but it's all about what isn't seen; excellent sound design leaves you to fill in the gaps between squelches. Rather than deploying jump scares, debut director Andrew Cumming focuses on creating a consistent sense of threat. Atmospheric and chilling, it doesn't reinvent the wheel, but adds some thoughtful twists to a well-worn genre — an intriguing sign of things to come from a new filmmaking voice. **VL**



AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER

★★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 8

SHOWRUNNER Albert Kim

CAST Gordon Cormier, Kiawentiio, Daniel Dae Kim, Ian Ousley

Live-action adaptations of animations are an often fraught proposition. Sadly, the new live-action take on *Avatar: The Last Airbender* mostly sheds the original's cartoonish charm and dynamic presentation in favour of more self-serious fantasy. At least as far as whitewashing is concerned, it is an improvement on M. Night Shyamalan's maligned 2010 adaptation — but the character work feels either thin or just plain, all feeling explained rather than felt. The results are a rather drab and thinly sketched spin on well-worn fantastical tales of oppression and rebellion. But hey, here's some good news: there's a perfectly fine animated version of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, also on Netflix. **KC**



Left: Schoolmates Eri (Hinata Hiiragi) and Minato (Sōya Kurokawa). **Below:** Teachers Mr Shoda (Akihiro Kakuta) and Mr Hori (Eita Nagayama) in the staff room. **Bottom:** Minato's mum Saori (Sakura Andō).

FILM

MONSTER

THE *SHOPLIFTERS* DIRECTOR RETURNS TO HIS NATIVE JAPAN

★★★★★

OUT 15 MARCH / CERT 12A / 127 MINS

DIRECTOR Hirokazu Kore-eda

CAST Sakura Andō, Sōya Kurokawa, Eita Nagayama, Hinata Hiiragi

PLOT When 11-year-old Minato (Kurokawa) begins to act strangely, his mother Saori (Andō) demands answers from his school.

FOLLOWING CINEMATIC ADVENTURES in Paris (*The Truth*) and South Korea (*Broker*), Hirokazu Kore-eda returns to his homeland of Japan for another round of fractured families, isolation and loss. In essence, *Monster* is *The Towering Inferno* meets *Rashomon* meets *Waterloo Road*: the director spinning a compassionate tale from the point of view of a parent, then a teacher, then a pupil. It's sometimes tough to follow but it is shot through with a gentle,

generous spirit, lucid filmmaking and terrific performances, confirming Kore-eda as one of the best directors of children working today.

The starting point for each story cycle is a deliberate fire at a hostess bar in a lakeside Japanese town. Who actually started the fire is an overarching mystery that gurgles away beneath the narrative, but Kore-eda locates the story firmly in his delicate-drama wheelhouse. The core of the story starts with 11-year-old Minato (Sōya Kurokawa) confessing to his mother Saori (Sakura Andō) that he has been struck by teacher Mr Hori (Eita Nagayama), rumoured to be a frequenter of the burning knocking shop, and the fallout that follows.

Is the boy lying? Is the teacher a weirdo? All potentialities are given a thorough work-out as *Monster* plays out the events from different vantage points. Each different rendering deepens your understanding of the characters and, more importantly, makes your sympathies and allegiances slip and slide like a '90s Essex foam party. The events themselves don't change, only the perspectives, Kore-eda playing fast and loose with our tendency to always assume the worst.

The director is working from Yuji Sakamoto's screenplay (the first time he hasn't written his own for nearly 30 years), but this still feels like a Kore-eda joint. There's lots of



lovely detail on display — a single running shoe resonates more strongly in each version — and, as ever with Kore-eda, the performances are on point. *Shoppers'* Sakura Andō is a force as the mother tearing into teachers she believes are concealing Mr Hori's bullying, and the film misses her presence when it switches tack. Kurokawa is yet another product of the Kore-eda School Of Child Acting Prodigies, his friendship with Hinata Hiiragi as an androgynous classmate beautifully etched.

It lacks the easy simplicity of the filmmaker's best work — the structural shenanigans sometimes work against its emotional efficacy — but it's yet another beautiful meditation on the difficulty in finding happiness. It also gets a cherry on top with Ryuichi Sakamoto's score (his last), the plaintive, piano-led pieces adding an air of melancholia — the cumulative effect of which is released in the film's final moments of joy. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT *Monster* is Hirokazu Kore-eda channelling Christopher Nolan: twisty storytelling in the service of wise empathy. There is no judgement in Kore-eda's worldview, just human behaviour in all its glorious complexity.

BOOKS

THE BLUES BROTHERS

IT'S DARK AND WE'RE WEARING READING GLASSES

★★★★★

AUTHOR DANIEL DE VISÉ



JOHN LANDIS' 1980 film *The Blues Brothers* is a Looney Tunes cartoon writ real: brazenly combining glorious R'n'B, spectacular car crashes, and the idiosyncratic comedy stylings of Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi. Such

a bonkers movie is inevitably the result of a bonkers making-of story — one that Daniel De Visé's impeccably researched, clear-headed, highly entertaining book does full justice to. But there is much more going on here than just a document of a single film.

Firstly, *The Blues Brothers: An Epic Friendship, The Rise Of Improv, And The Making Of An American Film Classic* is a portrait of two pals. After charting Belushi and Aykroyd's upbringing, De Visé pinpoints the pair's first meeting (it was the latter who first schooled the former in the blues). The pair were famously described as 'Mr Careful' (Aykroyd) and 'Mr Fuck It' (Belushi), and De Visé vividly brings the 'opposites attract' dynamic alive.

Beyond Belushi and Aykroyd, De Visé also traces the sea change in '70s American comedy, charting the rise of improvisational troupes such as The National Lampoon and Second City (Belushi appeared in a *Moby Dick* musical containing the lyric, "He ain't heavy/He's my



They're on a mission from God: Elwood (Dan Aykroyd) and Jake (John Belushi).

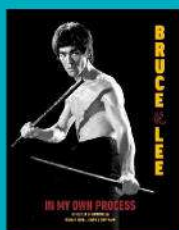
blubber"). All roads led to *Saturday Night Live*, and De Visé argues that this was the first generation of comedians who grew up with television; they knew how to bend and stretch the medium to the limit.

When it gets to *The Blues Brothers* on screen, De Visé delivers a satisfying deep dive into every aspect of production, from writing (Landis added such quotable lines as, "We're on a mission from God") to release. The book doesn't skimp on the cast excesses — Carrie Fisher was speechless on acid filming the Mystery Woman's manicure — but also delivers strong accounts of the car carnage, wrangles with executives and the Chicago-ness of it all. De Visé, a biographer of B.B. King, is also good on the music, writing with respect but not over-reverence about the bona

fide soul legends who cameled in the movie (we learn Ray Charles often had to pee).

The contours of this story, especially surrounding Belushi's addictions, are familiar, and De Visé often over-describes scenes from the film. But the book concludes with a textured, gripping but never salacious account of Belushi's last days, and what stays with you longer is the resolve and love of Belushi's long-suffering wife, Judy. This is perhaps the book's finest achievement: finding the humanity behind the sunglasses. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT Not only nirvana for *Blues Brothers* nerds but a fascinating snapshot of a cultural moment and a touching study of an unlikely friendship. Black hats off!



BRUCE LEE: IN MY OWN PROCESS

★★★★★

AUTHOR BRUCE LEE

Overseen by the martial-arts legend's family, this tome can veer towards the hagiographic: "Bruce Lee is just a finger pointing at the moon," exults a sample quote. It also, slightly bafflingly, features an essay by pro skateboarder Tony Hawk. But it's undeniably a beautiful book, filled with pages from Lee's diary, sketches and even poetry. And there are a few great insights: the Dragon was a fan of *Animal Farm*! **NDS**



DUNE EXPOSURES

★★★★★

AUTHORS GREIG FRASER, JOSH BROLIN

Not a traditional behind-the-scenes book, this striking portfolio takes a gratifyingly abstract approach to the coffee-table tome. A selection of arresting on-set shots by *Dune* DP Greig Fraser are interspersed with wistful reminiscence, abstract musings, and assorted poetry (including a number of rather lovely haikus) from the pen of Josh Brolin. Fraser's gaze wanders. Pensive Gurney ruminates. Beautifully weird. **JD**



THE FIXER

★★★★★

AUTHORS JOSH YOUNG, MANFRED WESTPHAL

Fred Otash — "keyhole peeper, wire tapper, morals enforcer, dirt collector and all-purpose scandalmonger to the stars" — is a ripe subject for a book. The LAPD detective-turned-private dick was hardly short of juicy stories, breathlessly recounted here (bolstered by Manfred Westphal, who met Otash). While it sometimes veers on pure 1950s gossip-column-style scandal, it's a mostly riveting read. **JN**

The *Pulp Fiction* theme party was in full swing.



KILLER QUOTE

"I had to read *Portrait Of A Lady* in school. Boy, that was a great read — like somebody dragging day-old spaghetti across my tits."

JAMIE
(MARGARET
QUALLEY)

FILM

DRIVE-AWAY DOLLS

YOU KNOW THE COEN BROTHERS. NOW MEET THE COEN COUPLE

★★★★★

OUT 15 MARCH / CERT 15 / 84 MINS

DIRECTOR Ethan Coen

CAST Margaret Qualley, Geraldine Viswanathan, Beanie Feldstein, Colman Domingo, Bill Camp

PLOT In 1999, Jamie (Qualley) and Marian (Viswanathan) take a "drive-away" rental car job from Philadelphia to Tallahassee — and get mixed up with some dodgy characters.

DRIVE-AWAY DOLLS was originally called 'Drive-Away Dykes' — a far better, funnier, and frankly more accurate title than the marketing-friendly one eventually settled on. (That original title is even cheekily acknowledged in the closing credits.) Because this film is, to use the technical parlance, hella lesbian: from the

comedy-cunnilingus found in the opening five minutes to the "very committed lesbians" of a college soccer team, *Dolls* wears its sapphic colours loud and proud.

That's notable, given that this is a Coen brother film, singular. Directed by Ethan Coen (his first without bigger brother Joel, if you don't count his 2022 Jerry Lee Lewis documentary), and co-written by Coen and his wife Tricia Cooke, who is queer, there is a unique energy here which can't be found in any of the previous 18 films from the brothers. It has a specificity, in subject matter and period, that feels refreshing, a rare example of the Coen-canon that centres female, gay characters.

Which is not to say that it doesn't feel, well, Coen-y. Margaret Qualley, as the kooky, charismatic Jamie, drops folksy Southern phrases like "Honey darlin'!" — channelling Nicolas Cage's H.I. 'Hi' McDunnough from *Raising Arizona*. Geraldine Viswanathan's Marian, meanwhile, is bookish and socially awkward, like a more affable Barton Fink. Joey Slotnick and C. J. Wilson play hired goons chasing down our heroes with a haplessness that recalls Steve Buscemi and Peter Stormare in *Fargo*. And the overall tone is all pep and vinegar, like the breeziest of Coen crime comedies: imagine if *Burn After Reading*

and *The Big Lebowski* had a lesbian baby, and you're part of the way there.

This is a film that almost incorrigibly just wants to have a good time, its spirit embodied in Qualley's Jamie, whose primary driving motivation, à la *American Pie*, is to get laid. There are two threads running throughout: a friendship (or more?) between Jamie and Marian, pitched

beautifully by the two leads; and a screwball crime conspiracy that bubbles under the surface, both threads exploding into total absurdity in the final act. The climactic reveal needs to be enjoyed for yourself — suffice to say that this entire movie is essentially one big dick joke.

Coen and Cooke are desperate for you not to take it too seriously. *Dolls'* characters are messy and flawed and sex-obsessed. There are wacky, increasingly bonkers sitcom-esque scene transitions. Nobody really learns anything by the end. Some might crave a bit more substance, but this is a film defiantly lacking in much of that. It is, ultimately, a shaggy dog story, about shagging. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT As furiously funny as it is helplessly horny, this lesbian road movie simultaneously feels exactly like a Coen brothers film — and entirely its own thing, too.

GAMES

SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

THEY'RE BAD GUYS. IT'S WHAT THEY DO. (UNFORTUNATELY)

★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X/S

THE IDEA OF the Suicide Squad, DC's cadre of scrappy supervillains — which include among their number a clown, a fish, a gun fetishist, and a loudmouth Aussie with trick boomerangs — stepping up when the real heroes are taken off the board could make for a great game. Unfortunately, *Kill The Justice League* is not it. Coming from the prestigious Rocksteady Studios, developer of the much-loved *Batman: Arkham* games, and building on the continuity of that series — interplanetary conqueror Brainiac taking over Superman's home turf of Metropolis and brainwashing the Justice League — it very much should be. But in shifting from story-driven single-player adventures to a loot-chasing, multiplayer-focused model, it drowns in mediocrity.

Suicide Squad struggles on two main fronts: shooting and movement through levels. Unfortunately, it also wants to be *built on* these. The core concept is appealing: speeding through the city, pouncing on Brainiac's forces, and blasting them into oblivion. Yet in practice, distinct movement styles for each of the four reluctant protagonists — Harley Quinn, King Shark, Deadshot and Captain Boomerang — end up feeling muddled and inconsistent. For instance, Harley's stolen Bat-grapple, allowing

"How many stars?!"
The reviews were in.



her to swing from a Bat-drone overhead, lacks any sense of momentum, while Deadshot's jetpack struggles with range and precision. Nothing clicks.

Gunplay, meanwhile, feels overly similar between the four, despite a vast assortment of firearms. But the arsenal itself is another problem — countless variations with head-spinning statistics are meant to incentivise repeated play, but no matter what you equip, combat feels formulaic; generic shootouts that could be taking place in *Destiny* as easily as the DC Universe.

That's the core problem — the pursuit of an ongoing multiplayer experience, where players can drop into missions and control other Squad members, necessitates a degree of repetition across the team. Would Hulk-like King Shark even be lugging a minigun around if the game didn't need each character to fit into a multiplayer

shooter mould? Probably not.

What's especially frustrating with *Suicide Squad* is that glimmers of potential are still apparent. Rocksteady's visual polish is undeniable, and the voice cast — including Tara Strong as Harley Quinn and Jason Isaacs as Brainiac — all impress with strong performances. The writing as a whole is better than the game deserves, balancing dark humour with high stakes and plenty of pathos. A compilation of the game's cutscenes might even make for a compelling DC Elseworlds movie — but having to shear off the actual game to find what's good here is damning. **MATT KAMEN**

VERDICT A strong concept centred on dirtbag anti-heroes should make this a delight, but banal mechanics and repetitive loot-grinding rob it of anything approaching greatness.



STARGATE: TIMEKEEPERS

★★★★

PC

With a story sandwiched between Seasons 7 and 8 of TV series *Stargate SG-1*, *Timekeepers* is hardly the most approachable entry into the world of this once ubiquitous sci-fi franchise. But those who endure will discover a solid real-time strategy campaign anchored in compelling squad-based subterfuge. The resulting series of playable episodes makes a compelling case to bring the *Stargate* franchise back out of stasis. **AA**



CHAOS GATE: DAEMONHUNTERS

★★★★

PS4/5, XBOX ONE/X/S

Warhammer 40,000 games are a notoriously mixed bag, but this turn-based tactics title, now making its console debut, is among the best. *XCOM* with Space Marines, this deftly marries the grimdark aesthetic of *40k* with satisfying squad-based skirmishes against minions of the plague god Nurgle. With individually named, fully customisable units, it's easy to get attached to your Marines, but try not to — *Chaos Gate* is without mercy. **JD**



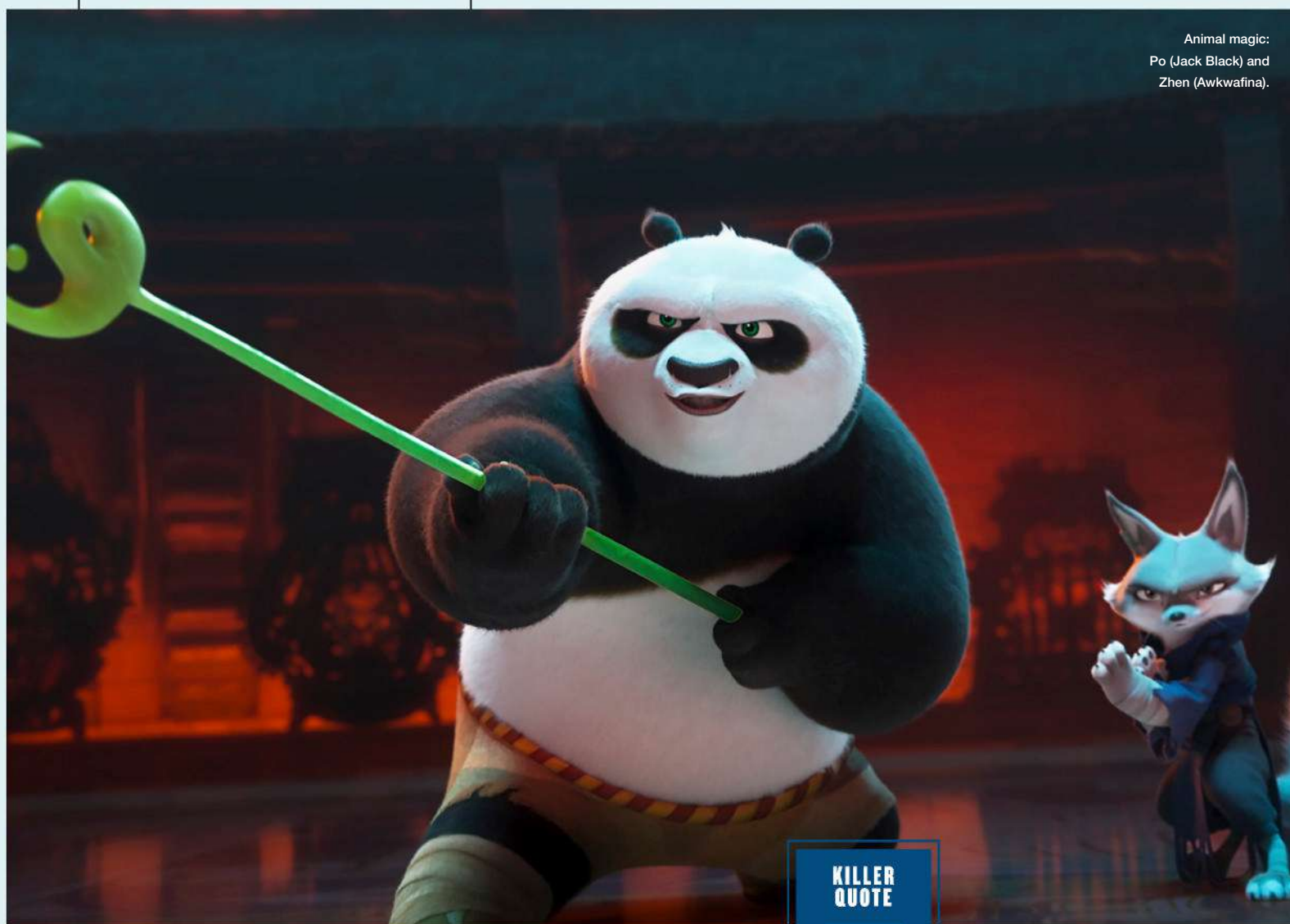
TERMINATOR: DARK FATE — DEFIANCE

★★★

PC

Following the alternate timeline established by 2019's *Terminator: Dark Fate*, players of this real-time tactics game may be surprised to find themselves battling not Skynet, but Legion, with nary a mention of He Who'll Be Back in sight. Even so, *Dark Fate — Defiance* offers refreshingly old-school strategy gaming, its frantic, top-down skirmishes elevated by familiar franchise window-dressing. **AA**

Animal magic:
Po (Jack Black) and
Zhen (Awkwafina).



KILLER QUOTE

"One shouldn't do a deep squat with a chopstick in one's pocket."
PO
(JACK BLACK)

FILM

KUNG FU PANDA 4

EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE ASS-KICKIN', BAMBOO-EATIN' HERO IS BACK

★★★

OUT 28 MARCH / CERT PG / 94 MINS

DIRECTOR Mike Mitchell

CAST Jack Black, Dustin Hoffman, James Hong, Bryan Cranston, Ian McShane, Awkwafina, Viola Davis, Ke Huy Quan

PLOT Panda and 'Dragon Warrior' Po (Black) must hand his title to someone new — but he is interrupted when the Chameleon (Davis) threatens the world.

EIGHT YEARS AFTER *Kung Fu Panda 3*, and 15 years since the franchise first began, Po returns. There's no radical new direction for this resurrection, but more of the slick, pacy and beautifully animated fun fans will be used to. Like the *Minions* series, this is reliable entertainment — never really pushing any boundaries, but likely to keep the kids quiet for

about 90 minutes.

To briefly catch up on where we left things: Po (voiced by Jack Black) is a panda who is both kung fu master and clumsy glutton. Chosen as the 'Dragon Warrior', he is China's greatest fighter, even though his dedication to his craft is minimal. He's the adopted son of a goose (James Hong), student of an exasperated red panda (Dustin Hoffman), and saviour of many imperilled animals. Each instalment sees Po face off with a scheming villain plotting to become the most powerful being on the planet. This time it's Chameleon (Viola Davis), a shape-shifting lizard who wants to transform into the biggest criminal boss the world has ever known.

On this adventure — and with an apparent eye on future franchise potential — Po has a sidekick. Zhen (Awkwafina), a fox, is a thief who's only out for herself. She's also a very handy fighter. Zhen has no interest in working with others, but (for reasons of plot convenience rather than logic) agrees to join Po in his quest to find the Chameleon, after he frees her from jail. Po is readying himself to hand the Dragon Warrior title to someone new. Where could he possibly find the ideal candidate?

It's rather streamlined since the previous,

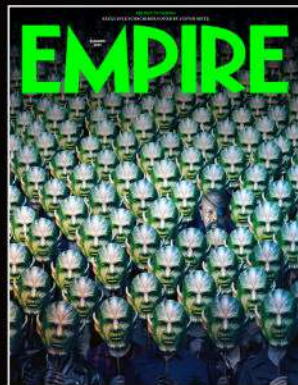
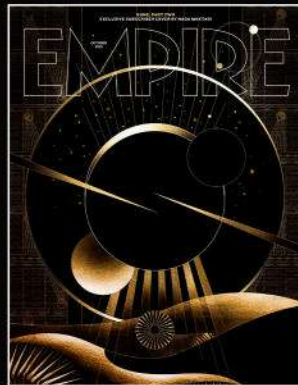
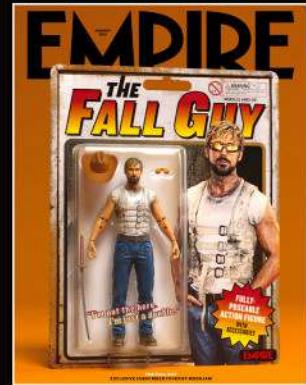
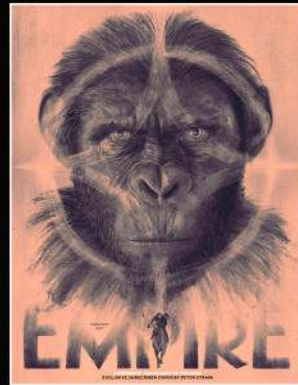
lavish film. The star cast has been shrunk (no Angelina Jolie, Lucy Liu, et al), the canvas feels a little smaller and the fight sequences a bit less grand. This is not always necessarily a negative. It works well as an action-buddy-comedy in the solid hands of director Mike Mitchell (*Trolls*, *The Lego Movie*). Black and Awkwafina make a sparky team — if future films lean on her, she seems entirely able to bear the weight — and a very lean plot gives plenty of space for big comedy set-pieces, like a bar brawl in a tavern teetering on a cliff, or a police chase through a criminal city. It's a shame Davis isn't given more opportunities for laughs as Chameleon, but she fills the character's small frame with lots of sinister gravitas.

The previous *Kung Fu Panda* movie pushed the series into more epic territory, with the apparent belief it was concluding the story. This is hedging its bets, seeding a number of possibilities for future movies. It's safe and fairly predictable, but still a good time. **OLLY RICHARDS**

VERDICT A step back from the last film in terms of ambition, this nevertheless continues the series' chirpy, amiable mood. Nothing to be po-faced about here.

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Here: Showing his mettle — Lord Yoshii Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada). Below: Cosmo Jarvis as John Blackthorne.

TV

SHŌGUN

THE BOOK-TURNED-TV-SHOW-TURNED-ANOTHER-TV-SHOW

★★★★★

OUT NOW (DISNEY+) / EPISODES VIEWED 8 OF 10

SHOWRUNNER Justin Marks

CAST Hiroyuki Sanada, Cosmo Jarvis, Anna Sawai, Tadanobu Asano, Hiroto Kanai

PLOT 17th century Japan is on the knife-edge of war. The arrival of a shipwrecked Englishman (Jarvis) triggers a wave of scheming, violence and spiritual reckoning.

JAMES CLAVELL'S 1975 historical-fiction novel *Shōgun* was first adapted for TV in 1980. As with that earlier effort, this adaptation — creatively led by *Top Gun: Maverick* writer Justin Marks and his wife Rachel Kondo — is set during a time of upheaval in Japan: five factions seek control of the country, whilst Portuguese Catholics hope to control its soul. Seeking ascendancy from the societal fraying are three key characters: the measured but militant Lord Yoshii Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada); his opportunistic, freshly beached advisor John Blackthorne (Cosmo Jarvis); and their Catholic-convert translator, Toda Mariko (Anna Sawai). Together they attempt to control — or become — cogs in the machine of power. Their devious, often violent mechanics would feel at home in the halls of Westeros, the plot growing knottier as honour, debt and deception entwine.

Cosmo Jarvis' performance is compelling, more for its unpredictability than anything else: his twitchy physicality and poison-dart eyes are magnetic, even if his barrelling line-delivery sails dangerously close to *Toast Of London* territory. In contrast, Sanada's subdued lord ripples with menace, micro-expressions of warfaring arithmetic revealing his tactical mind. After only flashes of screentime in early episodes, Sawai's Mariko grows into the show's most complex character, torn between love,



duty and spirituality, cloaked in a sombre show of stoicism.

Their pursuits are captured superbly, the surf-smacked cinematography capturing swirling, dread-filled imagery in one moment, gently ebbing, awe-inspiring seascapes the next; the sweeps of terror and beauty are deftly balanced. War is nightmarish, like when a cannonball rips an arm off to gruellingly practical effect — but it can be controlled, as when strikingly viewed from above, like a game of feudal Pac-Man, as flame-wielding soldiers scour a grid of city streets. The camera regularly creeps through water, forests and palaces, hesitantly discovering new lands, anxiously aware of the silent assassins at the frame's edge; within it are elegantly costumed characters draped in detailed silks and ornate, cascading armour that glows in the fog of war — whether in a vista or a candlelit portrait, it's all very screenshot-able.

The show's pace provides great pleasures alongside some unfortunate faults. Frustratingly, the wider narrative shape is mapped at an uneven speed; after episodes of patient plotting, the scales of battle skyrocket too promptly. A clichéd love-triangle plot is similarly rushed. However, there's real care given to individual scenes and moments in which war, love or even tea are being made. Composed with balletic staging and cut with graceful, engrossing rhythm, they (and perhaps the whole show) become a ritual to revel in.

JAKE CUNNINGHAM

VERDICT *Shōgun* makes for gripping television. Look past the knotty plotting and you'll find arresting performances and stunning visuals.

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THIS IS ME...NOW: A LOVE STORY

★★★

"It is in essence a kind of bizarre visual album, with a kind of a dream logic — which is to say, not much logic at all. Songs from the new album are given blunt, on-the-surface visual metaphors; like Garth Marengi, Jennifer Lopez clearly thinks subtext is for cowards." **JOHN NUGENT**

YOUR FAT FRIEND

★★★★

"In centring Aubrey Gordon, a person full of life and love and intelligence and trauma and multitudes, it does the work of transferring her gift for articulating society's issues around fatness to a full, immersive screen experience." **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

MOTHER'S INSTINCT

★★★★

"Anne Hathaway and Jessica Chastain have starred in films together before, but here they finally get to share a frame. It's a thrill to see them play off each other, and their chemistry is every bit as exhilarating as trying to figure out the film's next move." **BARRY LEVITT**

THE BAD BATCH: SEASON 3

★★★★

"Cameos from Emperor Palpatine and Asajj Ventress help tie Season 3 into wider lore, but largely in ways that serve the story rather than detract from it, a lesson other *Star Wars* shows could do well to learn." **DAVID OPIE**

DRIFT

★★★★

"This is a serious film: an elegiac piece of long silences, constantly wrong-footing the viewer. Giving substance to this string of often delicate vignettes is Cynthia Erivo (who also produces), in a captivating performance of quiet power and pride." **LIZ MOODY**



MEET THE FINALISTS

GET TO KNOW THE EXCITING FILMMAKERS VYING FOR SHORT-FILM FUNDING — AND GET READY TO CAST YOUR VOTE

ROLL UP, ROLL UP! The M&M'S Short Film Festival is here, ready to unveil some of the most impressive filmmakers of tomorrow. Not only is the festival bringing together vibrant voices from across the nation and shining a light on the next generation of talent — but it's also a competition, in which the lucky winner will receive £25,000 to bring their short-film idea to fruition.

From the array of applicants, it all comes down to Christine Ubochi, Tom Oxenham, and Sara Harrak — the three daring directors who came up with compelling cinematic concepts around the theme of 'belonging', which sits at the core of this year's festival (just like the peanut sits at the core of a delicious Peanut M&M'S). For now, they've cooked up teaser trailers for their short-film pitches — with each hoping to bag the top prize and go into production on the real deal.

Before you head online to watch their trailers and vote for your favourite (which will also put you in the running to win some M&M'S of your own), get to know the finalists as we quiz them on their influences, their approach to the notion of 'belonging' — and, most importantly of all, their favourite type of M&M'S.



CHRISTINE UBOCHI

FAVOURITE DIRECTORS: Ava DuVernay, Greta Gerwig, Spike Lee, the Coen brothers

FAVOURITE M&M'S: Crispy

THE SHORT: *Funke, Fatima And Madame Bunmi*

THE SYNOPSIS: Two best friends, Funke and Fatima, enlist the help of traditional witch doctor Madame Bunmi to achieve their dream bodies before their 18th birthday party, which is just a day away.

THE INSPIRATION: "*Freaky Friday*, 110 per cent.

The Hot Chick — I saw it when I was ten or 11, my two older sisters introduced me to it. And *You Are So Not Invited To My Bat Mitzvah*. I loved how the relationship between the girls seemed so sincere and genuine. *Booksmart*, too — just how funny it is."

THE THEME: "There can be a difficulty in feeling like you belong in the body that you were born with. I wanted to do that body-swap to see from a different person's perspective. The characters are part of different communities — I see Funke being a British-West African teenager, an only child, and Fatima is a British-Asian teenager from a big family. Despite their differences, they have a beautiful friendship."

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Funke, Fatima And Madame Bunmi



Anders The Dogman



Solars United

**TOM OXENHAM**

FAVOURITE DIRECTORS: Ruben Östlund, Julia Davis, Yorgos Lanthimos, Edgar Wright
FAVOURITE M&M'S: Peanut

THE SHORT: *Anders The Dogman*

THE SYNOPSIS: A lonely CEO thinks he can't buy happiness — but he can buy a high-tech dog suit, through which he finds the human connection he craves.

THE INSPIRATION: "What became the biggest one, out of the blue, was *American Psycho*. The longer I was writing it, I thought, 'This is turning into Patrick Bateman.' *Ex Machina* is hard to avoid — I love that film. And *Dogtooth* has influenced a lot of my work, accepting the surreal and playing it completely straight."

THE THEME: "It's about someone who, to us, is going to the most unbelievable lengths to seek human connection. Maybe for him, it feels completely logical. You can imagine these characters are surrounded by people constantly, but that might not mean they feel actual connections. We're at this peak of erratic tech billionaires and their vanity projects."

**SARA HARRAK**

FAVOURITE DIRECTORS: Desiree Akhavan, Nida Manzoor, Ramy Youssef, Emma Seligman
FAVOURITE M&M'S: Peanut

THE SHORT: *Solars United*

THE SYNOPSIS: A grass-roots football team are fighting to save their club, when the arrival of a new player creates triangles on and off the pitch, sending their plans into a spiral.

THE INSPIRATION: "Obviously *Bend It Like Beckham*, which is a brilliant film. I've mentioned *Bottoms* and *We Are Lady Parts* to the actors and heads of departments as references — it's essentially about these misfits working together, and it somehow works. *Derry Girls* is a great example as well, these weird people put together. I really love that."

THE THEME: "I want to show that feeling of belonging within a second family, essentially. It's a family, and it's not your normal family. Seeing these misfits, really highlighting these different characters, and showing there's always a place for someone — that's where the belonging comes from."

m&m's

WATCH THE TRAILERS NOW AND CAST YOUR VOTE FOR YOUR CHANCE TO WIN

You've read what the filmmakers have to say — now it's time to head online and take a look at their work. Each of the finalists has created a concept trailer to reflect the short film they want to make, which you can view online. Once you've seen them all, place a vote for your favourite — and the winner will receive £25,000 and expert mentorship to flesh out their trailer into a full short. Oh, and *you'll* be in with a chance of winning M&M'S chocolate (T&Cs apply). The power is in your hands — head to the competition site now, and let the M&M'S Short Film Festival unspool.

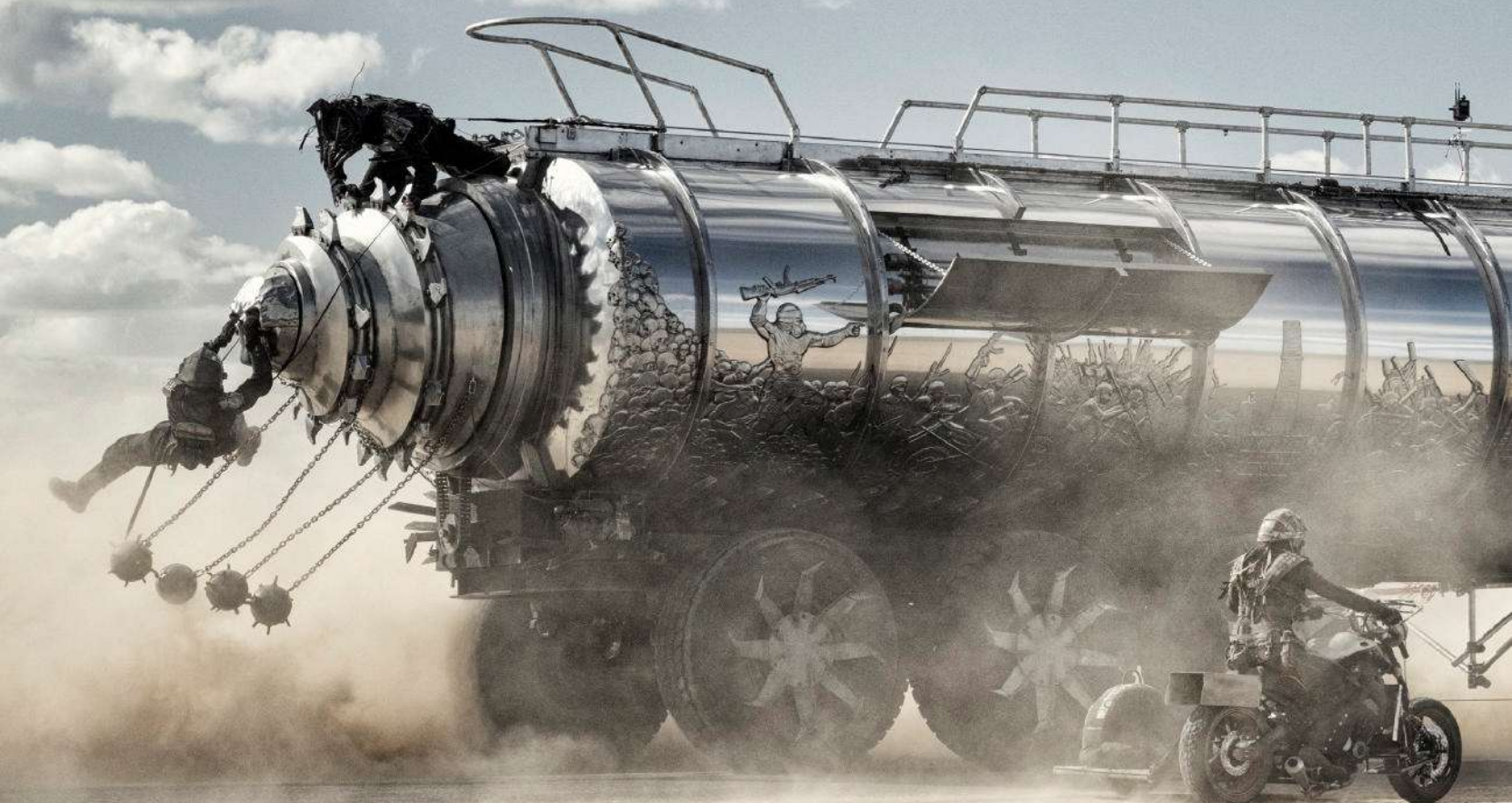


Visit mms.com/shortfilmfestival to view the three finalists' trailers, cast your vote, and find more details and full T&Cs. The public vote is open until 31 March.



Inspired to start your own filmmaking journey? Bauer Academy's Video Storytelling course in partnership with M&M'S is offering 20 people a place on an exclusive workshop at the KISS studios in London, where you'll learn storytelling techniques, get tips, and gain industry insight to kick off your development as a director. Apply online at empireonline.com/mms/ by 31 March, and you could win a spot. T&Cs apply.

RIDE HI



LAST TIME GEORGE MILLER HEADED TO THE DESERT, WE GOT THE GENRE—
NOW HE'S BACK, WITH NEW STARS AND EVEN BIGGER IDEAS. FASTEN YOUR

STORIC



DEFINING, FLAME-LICKED ACTION OPERA THAT IS *MAD MAX: FURY ROAD*.
SEATBELT AND PREPARE TO WITNESS **FURIOSA**

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

ANYA TAYLOR-JOY WAS READY.



Ten months, and more, of training had led her to this point: the moment when she was about to put pedal to the metal on the desert sand as the title character in George Miller's *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*. Motorbikes, cars, you name it, she had mastered it. She just couldn't do it on a public road. "I still don't have my licence, which I find hysterical," she laughs. "I can pull some really crazy tricks in a car, and I have yet to be able to parallel park."

No matter. There is no parallel parking on the Fury Road. There is only one direction: forward. Surrounded by other vehicles, Taylor-Joy and her cast-mates and cadre of stunt-drivers waited for the signal from the unassuming, bespectacled Miller. Then it came. "START YOUR ENGINES!"

So everyone did. "You wouldn't be able to hear anything," recalls Taylor-Joy. "You'd get a vague approximation of, 'I think they yelled, 'Action!' — let's go for it!' It's a very rock 'n' roll way to start a shoot." But it's very Mad Max, and oh so very George Miller. Start your engines, indeed. Furiosa is back, and she's ready to ride eternal.



The last time we saw Furiosa was almost a decade ago, when Miller returned to the world of Max Max, the world he created back in 1979, and delivered a masterpiece. *Mad Max: Fury Road* reintroduced us to the Road Warrior, Max 'Mad' Rockatansky (with Tom Hardy replacing Mel Gibson in the role), a wandering soul who travels across the irradiated Australian Outback in the wake of a globe-gutting nuclear conflagration, and usually winds up in hair-raising, high-speed chases. But there was more. Much more. Miller introduced a dizzying array of new characters and concepts — the Immortan Joe, a bloated warlord who rules over his people with an iron fist and plastic abs; the War Boys, his loyal, happy-to-die followers; the Five Wives, women the Immortan has imprisoned as chattel; places called the Bullet Farm, Gas Town and the Green Place.

And then there was the Imperator Furiosa. A one-armed warrior woman with a harsh buzz-cut and a harsher attitude (masking a deep wellspring of emotion), Furiosa was the driver of not only the story of *Fury Road*, but also the Immortan Joe's colossal armoured truck, the War Rig. It is this that she steals at the beginning of the movie, having smuggled the Five Wives aboard it, in a desperate attempt to make a break for freedom; an attempt that will see her forge an initially uneasy partnership with Max, and bring her to the brink. She is, as played by Charlize Theron, one of the most iconic and captivating action heroes of the modern age.

The *Mad Max: Fury Road* shoot was so notoriously troubled (production delays! Warring co-stars! Interference from executives!) that it spawned a near-400-page 'making of' book, Kyle Buchanan's *Blood, Sweat*





Above: Anya Taylor-Joy as the young Furiosa, with Praetorian Jack (Tom Burke). **Left:** Director George Miller on his frankly spectacular set, issuing instructions to Chris Hemsworth in his frankly spectacular rig.

& *Chrome*, that could easily have been 1,000. “Every film is arduous,” admits Miller, talking to *Empire* from the Sydney offices of his production company, Kennedy Miller Mitchell. “It was tough out there in the desert.”

However, he shrugged all of that off to deliver a wildly unconventional, formally daring two-hour chase movie, featuring action sequences so staggeringly complex and wild that it prompted Steven Soderbergh to wryly state in 2017, “I don’t understand how they’re not still shooting that film, and I don’t understand how hundreds of people aren’t

dead.” It’s a movie so immensely imaginative that the guy playing a flamethrowing guitar isn’t the craziest thing in it.

Fury Road’s greatness was apparent when it debuted back in 2015 — action filmmakers fell over themselves to laud Miller’s mastery of the medium, it was nominated for ten Oscars, winning six (Miller was nominated and should, if we’re being honest, have won for Best Director), and it grossed just under \$400 million worldwide. Its reputation and impact has only grown since. Not for nothing did *Empire* readers vote it the Greatest Film Of The 21st Century (so far, admittedly) back in 2020.

There has since been, understandably, a clamour for more Mad Max, but Miller needed time off to recharge, and make a movie — 2022’s delightfully odd genie love story, *Three Thousand Years Of Longing* — outside the

confines of the Wasteland, the post-apocalyptic landscape in which all the Mad Max movies are set. Eventually, though, he was ready to return. “We started pre-production on this at least a good year before we shot *Three Thousand Years Of Longing*,” he reveals. We couldn’t hear it at the time, but Miller had started his engines.

This time, though, he wasn’t interested in going forward. He was going backwards instead.



Even origin stories need an origin story. *Furiosa*’s began as Miller was gearing up to finally make *Fury Road* after years of false starts. As he and his team developed that movie, Miller and one of his co-writers, the dramaturg Nico Lathouris (who also played Grease Rat in the original *Mad Max*), tasked themselves with a little side project. “To help not only the

Road rage: Dementus (Hemsworth), a twisted father figure for Furiosa, leads the Biker Horde.



actors, but everybody working on the film, we wrote the backstory of not only Furiosa, but how the rest of the world was, and how all the characters evolve,” says Miller.

But George Miller doesn’t do things by halves. He didn’t just produce a pamphlet loaded with bullet points (from the Bullet Point Farm). This was a full-on screenplay called, simply, *Furiosa*. At that point, it was merely a technical exercise. “The Furiosa story was written to serve *Fury Road*, to inform *Fury Road*,” he admits. Yet, one day — as the first day of filming loomed — Theron approached him. “She said, ‘Please, George, can we make this first?’” laughs Miller. “It was the first time I realised that there’s something really strong in this story.”

He hasn’t stopped thinking about it since. And when George Miller can’t get something out of his head, invariably it winds up on the screen.

The director says that, had he taken Theron’s advice and shot *Furiosa* first, or even in the couple of years following *Fury Road*, the title role would have remained hers.

“It definitely would have been Charlize,” he states. But, even though Theron is still only in her forties, the story of *Furiosa* took the character into her teens and twenties. “As time went on, I began thinking, ‘Oh, maybe we could do de-ageing,’” Miller admits. “Then I watched really masterful filmmakers like Ang Lee and Martin Scorsese, doing *Gemini Man* and *The Irishman*, and I saw that it hadn’t been licked. All you’d be watching is, ‘Look how well the technology works.’ It would not have been persuasive.”

So, he launched a search for a younger Furiosa. The Emperor imperative, if you will. It didn’t take long, mainly because Edgar Wright, who was working with Taylor-

Joy on *Last Night In Soho*, recommended her. “He said, ‘If you’re thinking of casting her, whatever it is, DO IT!’” says Miller. Taylor-Joy smiles at the thought. “I’m really indebted to Edgar on that,” she says. “I wonder what George saw that made him think I could do *Furiosa*.”

Luckily, *Empire* asked Miller that very question. “Ultimately, it’s an intuitive response,” he says. “There’s an innately resolute quality in her. She’s a very determined and rigorous person. She has a mystique about her. And she’d been trained young as a ballet dancer. Charlize trained young as a ballet dancer. There’s a precision to them that was needed.”



Theron left big boots to fill. So Taylor-Joy decided not to fill them by simply doing a Theron impersonation. “I think that would have



“DEMENTUS IS PRETTY HORRIBLE. HE’S TEN STEPS AHEAD.”

CHRIS HEMSWORTH



Above:
Dementus slips into something a little more comfortable.

Right:
Praetorian Jack and Furiosa push the pedal to the metal.

Far right:
Lachy Hulme as the young Immortan Joe.



really tripped me up if I did,” she says. In fact, she didn’t have any contact with Theron until after filming had finished. They have tentatively made plans to get together and swap Wasteland stories. “She’s been so classy and kind in letting me go and do it. But I feel very lucky that, from the second I read the script, I just knew this person. I felt so fiercely protective over Furiosa, and fiercely protective of her interests.”

Miller and his cast are, even when dealing with a prequel where we know the fate of several major characters, reluctant to engage with plot specifics. Yet *Furiosa*’s interests are simple, at least on paper. “The story is the saga of Furiosa,” explains Miller, “and how she gets taken from home, and spends the rest of her life trying to get back.”

We will, along the way, learn more about her and her background, about the Green Place — the oasis of calm from which she is plucked — and the Vuvalini, the group of women who helped raise her. We will find out why she cuts off her hair, something Taylor-Joy wasn’t able to do for real for the movie due to the schedule. “I was so excited to shave my head,” she says. “Then George saw me in real life, and went, ‘No, we can’t!’”

We will also find out how she loses most of her left arm. And how she ends up driving the War Rig for Immortan Joe, a man she despises. “We follow the whole story,” says Miller. “*Fury*

Road, the story unfolds over three days and two nights. This film follows the story that runs directly into *Fury Road*, for 15 years. It’s a different animal. It’s got many different locations. It’s an odyssey. No question.”

But just because we know the broad strokes of the saga doesn’t mean we know everything. There are huge swathes of Furiosa’s upbringing that are about to be unveiled. And, while Taylor-Joy says that, “for a lot of this film, Furiosa feels so entirely alone”, we’re about to meet two of the most important men in her life. One is Praetorian Jack (Tom Burke), the current driver of the War Rig, and someone who Taylor-Joy describes as “decent, and good, and dignified”. (Burke won’t be drawn on this, only to say that, “It’s a slow burn,” before correcting himself. “It’s not. Nothing in the movie is a slow burn.”)

The other is as far removed from decent and good and dignified as you can get. He is the newest warlord on the Wasteland block. And if you were wondering what sort of guy he might be, his name is Dementus.

...

Chris Hemsworth, like many of us, saw *Fury Road* in a cinema in 2015 (the Electric in Notting Hill, to be precise). Like many of us, he emerged staggered and dazed, excited by the possibilities of cinema. Like many of us, he had a desire to work with George Miller. Unlike many of us, ➤



he made it happen.

Around 2020, Hemsworth found himself in a room with Miller, a man whose movies adorned his Australian upbringing. And, even though Hemsworth was long since past auditioning, he realised he was doing just that. “It was kind of nerve-racking to be back in that sort of space, and really feel like I was having to pitch myself,” says the actor. “I came out of the meeting, and I wasn’t 100 per cent certain, but I’m pretty sure he said, ‘I’d love you to play the part.’”

That part was, of course, Dementus. In story terms, Miller says that *Furiosa* is “taken into the world of the Wasteland” by the character, who appears to be the warlord who filched her from her family. In the ensuing years he, along with his roving gang of bikers, serves as a fucked-up father figure of sorts. “I think that’s how he sees himself,” says Hemsworth. “I think there’s a paternal quality and nature to the relationship in his eyes. [Furiosa] would, I’m sure, argue to her death the complete opposite.” (Taylor-Joy describes the relationship thus: “It’s almost like you’re fighting her becoming him. When you see what she is experiencing, there’s a part of you that wants her to give into it.”)

Whichever way you slice it, this guy is trouble. “He’s a pretty horrible individual,” says Hemsworth, a galaxy away from Thor. “Through the whole film we kept coming back to, ‘This is evil, but what is the intention behind it?’ It’s not

just sadistic insanity. There is a real purpose, the wheels are turning, he’s plotting and planning and ten steps ahead of everyone else.”

That includes a younger version of the Immortan Joe, with whom Dementus seems destined to butt heads. “They’re both trying to figure one another out,” says Hemsworth. “Immortan Joe is probably thinking, ‘Is this guy insane, or is he pretending to be insane?’ Are they enemies? How is their relationship evolved?”

In *Furiosa*, the Immortan — played so memorably in *Fury Road* by a masked Hugh Keays-Byrne — is in his pumped-up pomp, ruling over the Citadel, with its supply of fresh water, while he’s set up something of a functioning society thanks to close ties with the nearby Bullet Farm and Gastown. “This covers the design of the world,” explains Miller. “It’s a mini-version of the world we live in today, and perhaps always lived in, and who knows what’s going to happen in the future?”

Into this happy, harmonious, deeply heinous little picture comes Dementus, roaring in on his motorcycle chariot with Furiosa and thousands of gang members in tow, ready to upset the apple cart and challenge the Immortan’s dominance. Sadly, Keays-Byrne passed away in 2020, but the Immortan lives on in *Furiosa* thanks to Australian actor Lachy Hulme. A student of the Mad Max films, and firm friend of Miller’s, Hulme had already been

Top: “Think Gandalf, but gnarlier...” Miller offers direction.
Above, left to right: Surely Burning Man would be round the next corner; Furiosa on high alert.

“I CAN PULL SOME PRETTY CRAZY TRICKS IN A CAR.”

ANYA TAYLOR-JOY



In your face! Furiosa lives up to her name.

cast as Rizzdale Pell, a one-eyed member of Dementus' gang. But after Keays-Byrne passed away, Hulme asked what Miller was planning to do with the Immortan. "He said, 'I'll probably just get a body double,'" recalls Hulme. "I said, 'Well, somebody needs to step up for Hugh. Someone needs to honour this great man. I can do it. I can do the voice. And it's all in the eyes.'"

Miller initially demurred, and only gave Hulme the green light during filming. "He said, 'Do you want to do it?' I said, 'What took you so long? You've finally figured out that this movie ain't gonna make dollar one until you've got double Lachy Hulme in it!'"

Hemsworth, who has the good fortune to look like, well, Chris Hemsworth, went through four hours of make-up every morning in an attempt to look less like Chris Hemsworth. With long, black hair, a great big bushy beard and

a crooked nose, Dementus looks like what he is: someone who has been forged in the irradiated, savage fires of the Wasteland. "For the first week or so I'd be like, 'Holy shit, who's that?'" says Hemsworth. "We wanted it to be shocking."

Hulme, who insists on calling Miller 'Doctor George' as a nod to Miller's status as an actual trained man of medicine, claims to have had an impact on Dementus' look. "Initially, his nose was based on my nose," laughs the actor. "But it looked too much like my nose, so they put the bump at the top of it. But when I got cast as the Immortan with the fake abs, I said to Chrissy Hemsworth, 'They gave you my nose, but I got your abs.'"



There are other characters from *Fury Road* who show up in *Furiosa* — Nathan Jones as Rictus Erectus, the Immortan's six-packed son, and

Angus Sampson as the Organic Mechanic, to name but two. But the franchise's title star seems to be AWOL, the crazy smeg. "I called the film 'Mad Maxless' while we were shooting it," laughs Hulme.

However, when the trailer debuted last November, the film formerly known simply as *Furiosa* now came complete with, 'A Mad Max Saga'. It's tempting to detect the hand of a studio eager to reassure fans that the film would still be mad to the max. But might it, in fact, suggest that Rockatansky rocks up somehow? "Well, I won't give away too much about that," teases Miller. "All I'll say is, Max is lurking there in the background."

Whether he's present or not, *Furiosa* is a Mad Max film in form and function and spirit. Miller, ever conscious of repetition, did not want to simply make 'Fury Road Part 2'. "I didn't go

Right: Taylor-Joy, like Furiosa, is "a very determined and rigorous person", says Miller.

Below: News reaches the War Boys that the service station's all out of Scotch eggs.

into *Furiosa* saying, 'Oh good, everyone liked *Fury Road*, so they're gonna really love this,'" he says. "You can't think like that." So he's widening the scope, expanding the timeline, placing greater emphasis on dialogue. But there is still going to be a huge amount of action, on a humungous (or Humungus) scale. In the trailer, when Dementus says to Furiosa, "Do you have it in you to make it epic?", it almost seems like Miller is challenging himself.

"That line is specifically between one character and another, but it just so happens to fit the movie," says Miller. "It's not the same as *Fury Road*, where there's a great armada of vehicles dashing across the Wasteland, but there are scenes with lots and lots of vehicles. There's no question that the world is epic."

He's not kidding. Lachy Hulme likens the production to, "David Lean, but with motorbikes instead of camels. When you see 4,000 custom-made motorbikes come over a hill, you shit your pants."

Tom Burke was so involved in the stunt sequences that he says, fondly, "I went months without saying a word." He also briefly drove the War Rig, "a big old thing, and there are times you're going really quick around bends and quarries and you're not on an even road. It's like being on a rollercoaster but where you're driving."

Hemsworth, meanwhile, can't help but laugh when memories of the 2022 shoot flood back to him. "The chariot bike is the wildest



piece of machinery I've ever driven, and I loved every second of it," he says. "I mean, hanging off a crane at one point and being loaded onto a monster truck, and then on the monster truck someone unclips me off a harness and the truck spins away into a burnout. How this world comes from one of the kindest individuals, I'll never know..."

And that ten months of training was not wasted on Taylor-Joy. "One of the first things George asked me was, 'How much of it do you want to do?'" she says. "I was like, 'Everything that you'll let me do.' These are huge, huge set-pieces. You don't want to mess that up."

Whether *Furiosa* is the final Mad Max saga remains to be seen. But even as he approaches his 80th birthday, Miller might just have one more for the *Fury Road*. When he and Lathouris



**“THIS FILM’S
A DIFFERENT
ANIMAL. IT’S
AN ODYSSEY.”**

GEORGE MILLER

were filling in that back story for *Furiosa*, they didn’t stop there. “We did the same for Max,” adds Miller. That movie, which would be called *The Wasteland*, would be another origin story of sorts, filling in the blanks about what happened to Max before we meet him at the beginning of *Fury Road*, out of his gourd and gobbling down geckos. *Furiosa* got the nod ahead of it this time around because, according to Miller, “*Furiosa* was more fully realised in screenplay and design”. But *The Wasteland* might be next. “You get habituated to the world,” he says. “It’s very rich mining for a storyteller, I think. That’s why I’m still doing it.”

And if anyone has it in them to make it epic, it’s Doctor George Miller. 🗡️

FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA IS IN CINEMAS FROM 24 MAY

THE MAD MAXICON

• • •

NEW TO THE WASTELAND? DON’T
WORRY — JUST LEARN THESE
SIMPLE WORDS AND PHRASES



AQUA COLA

A nickname for good, old-fashioned water. Not to be confused with Diet Aqua Cola, or controversial New Aqua Cola, which changed the formula, much to consumers’ anger.

BLOOD BAG

A term given to a healthy person whose blud is transfused into War Boys. Sorry, we meant “blood”, not “blud”. That was a Type-O.

CHROME

A thing of great value, something to aspire to be. Sponsored by Google.

GUZZOLENE

Petrol. A distortion of “gasoline”. Although do not — repeat, do not — attempt to guzzle it.

HALF-LIFE

A person, usually a War Boy, who is terminally ill, due to radiation.

IMMORTAN

A job title bestowed on an important figure, designed to denote their everlasting status. Comes complete with 25 days’ holiday a year and the key to the executive toilet.

IMPERATOR

Assistant Immortan. Sorry, Assistant to the Immortan.

REVHEAD

Either a name given to War Boys who can drive, or fans of a Tom Hollander sitcom.

SCHLANGER

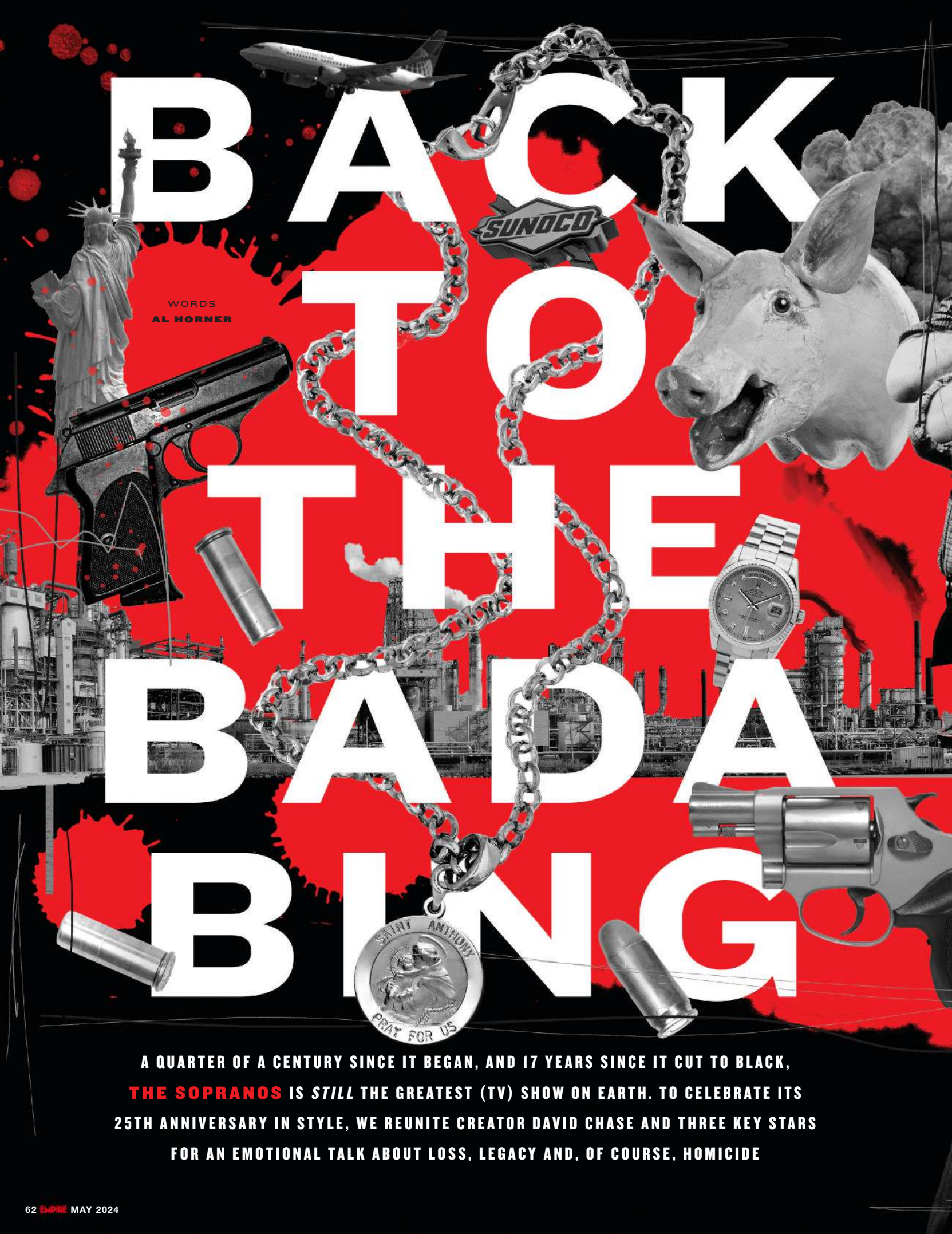
A gentleman’s fleshy appendage.
A Johnson. A little lad. A willy.

SMEG

A foolish individual. They love *Red Dwarf* in the Wasteland.

WAR BOY

A young man raised to be a soldier for the Immortan. Does not come with 25 days’ holiday and you are the executive toilet.



BACK TO THE BAD BING

WORDS
AL HORNER

A QUARTER OF A CENTURY SINCE IT BEGAN, AND 17 YEARS SINCE IT CUT TO BLACK, **THE SOPRANOS** IS STILL THE GREATEST (TV) SHOW ON EARTH. TO CELEBRATE ITS 25TH ANNIVERSARY IN STYLE, WE REUNITE CREATOR DAVID CHASE AND THREE KEY STARS FOR AN EMOTIONAL TALK ABOUT LOSS, LEGACY AND, OF COURSE, HOMICIDE



PIZZALAND

PIZZALAND

EXITS 14-14C

78

19

Newark Airport
Holland Tunnel
1 1/2 MILES

BADA BING

ILLUSTRATION
RUSSELL MOORCROFT



n the Bada Bing, they'd have called it a 'sit-down' — a term used by Mob-land mercenaries to describe rare meetings between formidable figures from the Mafia landscape. Meetings where people could say what needed to be said, and say it with gusto. Like when Johnny Sack assembled the families, pleading for permission to whack Ralph Cifaretto. Or when Tony Blundetto killed Phil Leotardo's brother, Billy, putting the DiMeo and Lupertazzi crime families on the brink of war. Or when a certain duck-loving, therapy-attending gangster survived an assassination attempt by his own uncle, and carnage beckoned...

Today's virtual sit-down, however, is different. When four of the principle players from what many regard to be the greatest TV show of all time, *The Sopranos*, arrive at their meet-up — a reunion brokered by *Empire* to celebrate the series' 25th anniversary — there

are no beefs to be resolved. Quite the opposite, in fact. Carmela Soprano herself, Edie Falco, greets Lorraine Bracco (Dr Melfi) with a smile bigger than Paulie Walnuts' kill list. And when the series' legendary creator David Chase arrives, Steven Van Zandt — Silvio Dante in the show — salutes his *capo* with a cheer deeply out of keeping with the nonchalant mobster he once played.

Across six enthralling seasons, Chase, Falco, Bracco and Van Zandt — who prior to *The Sopranos* was best known as Bruce Springsteen's guitarist — helped change television forever. The show told a complex, novelistic Mob tale that exploded a pipe bomb beneath presumptions of what TV could be. A quarter of a century on from its first episode, there's much to celebrate — and much to mourn, too. At one point in our interview, *Empire* wonders how much sweeter this reunion would be were James Gandolfini — the man who was Tony Soprano, the show's tortured, charismatic lead — here to share in its incredible legacy. No need to worry, though, says Falco. "He's here," she smiles. "I truly believe he's with us right now..."

First things first: *The Sopranos* was a show where characters were lucky to make it through six minutes, let alone six seasons. Edie, Steven, Lorraine — your characters were three of the few to make it out alive by the final episode. Was it a monetary bribe you gave David, or...?

Steven Van Zandt: Nah, we were just the cheapest. [Laughs]

Edie Falco: So *that's* why we lasted so long! Is that right, David?

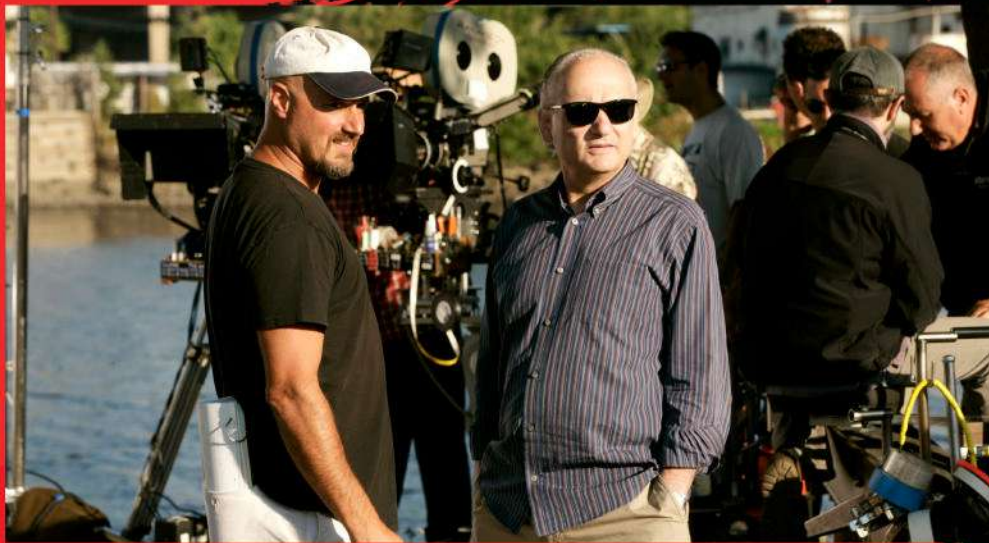
David Chase: Well, here's the thing about all the killings on the show. If you look at the real Mob, I think there were a grand total of nine Mob homicides from '99 to 2007 in the New York metropolitan area. We were doing nine a season. [Laughs] So yes, not everyone made it out alive...

Lorraine Bracco: Like Big Pussy (Tony's friend-turned-informant, whacked in Season 2). We all begged you, "Don't kill him! Don't kill him!" Remember that?

Chase: I do. The compromise was, we killed him but promised to bring him back for a few episodes (*in flashbacks and dream*



Clockwise from left: Paulie Walnuts (Tony Sirico), Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) and Silvio Dante (Steven Van Zandt) handle a situation; Creator David Chase (right) on set; Tony and Dr Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco).



sequences). That death had a big imprint on the show. It said to the audience: no-one's safe.

In the 25 years since the show first aired, have you worked out what it was that *The Sopranos* tapped into, that made it such a phenomenon then and has given it such longevity since?

Falco: I think about that question all the time. Why did people like this show? Why did they love this anti-hero? I don't have the answers. How it fits into the lexicon of shows at the time, what made America ready for a show like *The Sopranos*, I just couldn't tell you.

Bracco: I think people connected to David.

Van Zandt: Me too. A lot of it was the detail. David took you backstage into the Mob life: what it was like, the mundanity of it, and people hadn't seen that before. But I also think, TV at that time, it was made by committee. You had so many compromises. *The Sopranos* was unique because it was one man's vision. David had been in TV his whole life and I think at that point, he was tired of compromising. Tired of the bullshit TV was selling. He wanted to tell a story inspired

by his relationship with his mother.

Chase: She never made a dime from it, by the way. [Laughs] I think people felt a kinship with the humans on screen. Yes, they were mobsters, but their problems were the audience members' problems. Their concerns, their fears, their enjoyments became the audience's too. I also feel that deep inside, we all want to be those people. We want to rip someone's face off when someone gives us a smart remark. I think it comes from our ape ancestors or whatever — we can be very savage, we have that impulse. Why [audiences] didn't feel ashamed of that, why they didn't reject it, I don't know.

David, you've spoken before about how much pride you take in the way the show destigmatised therapy for a lot of young men. Which other aspects of its impact are you proud of?

Chase: I liked what it gave to Italian-Americans. We once had an open call for actors in Harrison, New Jersey, and 13,000 people showed up. The police had to shut it down. The exit on the turnpike was completely screwed up. And they were all Italian. All 13,000.

What were some of the other moments that underlined for you all how huge the show became? You must have each experienced some intense examples of *Sopranos* fandom over the years — people coming up to you to

“DEEP INSIDE, WE WANT TO BE THOSE PEOPLE.”

DAVID CHASE

recite their favourite lines and so on.

Bracco: “My nephew is a cunt hair away from controlling all of North Jersey — and I am that cunt hair!” That (*spoken by Dominic Chianese's irascible Uncle Junior*) was always one of my favourites, by the way — an all-time great *Sopranos* line.

Van Zandt: I definitely had it a lot. In 1999, I had been a pretty famous rock 'n' roll guy for 25 years already. But within three or four weeks of the show being on air, everybody on the street was talking to me about *The Sopranos*. It was like, “Forget about that rock-star stuff. *The Sopranos* is what matters now!” I called David and said, “You know, David, I think there's



something going on here.” I saw it happen with Bruce Springsteen. And I saw it happening with *The Sopranos*.

Falco: The success was absolutely overwhelming. People loved the show. Loved it. And they wanted to share that love every day with you.

It’s impossible to go any further in this conversation without talking about the great James Gandolfini —

Bracco: Wait, who? [Everyone laughs]

Falco: Can I just say, I think if Jim were alive with us and here for this conversation — this is *exactly* as much a part of this conversation as he would ever have been. [Laughs] He was never big on talking about the show, or about himself. He went in, did the work and hung out with people he cared about. That was it. So it’s sort of fitting that he’s not required to answer any of these questions. He wouldn’t want to, I don’t think.

Bracco: Oh no, he would *not* have wanted to.

Van Zandt: You know, as I’ve gotten older and started losing friends, of which Jim was one of

the best, my way to deal with it has become just pure denial. I think about Jim almost every day. We were gonna open a bar together. He was gonna be in (*Netflix series*) *Lilyhammer* with me. Every day, something will come up that makes me think of him. But in life, you’ll go six months without seeing a friend, right? Sometimes a couple of years, because your schedules aren’t matching up. So I just think of him that way. It’s the only way I cope.

Bracco: Yeah. There was a 25th anniversary party last week, where I saw his son, Michael. I remember holding him on set as a little baby. And talking to Michael, I felt Jimmy there. I felt he was close to me.

Is there a particular moment you each have of James Gandolfini that speaks to the man he was away from Tony Soprano?

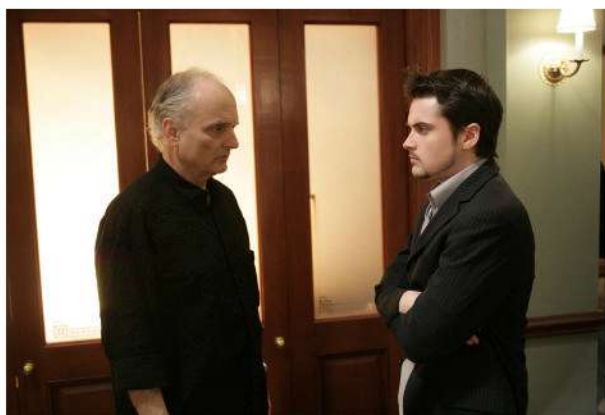
Bracco: Well, he was a pain in the ass to me. I remember he was always so happy when he’d finish filming his monologues (*in the therapy scenes*), that he’d start to strip or dance or go fucking crazy. Did he do that with you, Edie?

Falco: He didn’t strip for me, because I was his

**“JIM WOULD
QUIT THE
SHOW
BASICALLY
EVERY DAY.”**

STEVEN VAN ZANDT

wife. [Laughs] My experience of him was, he was kind of a goofball. He was this suburban guy who decided to act way late in the game, and on some level was always looking over his shoulder. Like someone was going to find out he wasn’t supposed to be the guy. The feeling I got is he could never really manage how lucky he felt to have been a part of this show.



Clockwise from main: Just your everyday Mafia family — Carmela (Edie Falco), Tony, A.J. (Robert Iler) and Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler); Mob moll Adriana La Cerva (Drea de Matteo) makes her point; A pensive Melfi; Chase and Iler confer.

Van Zandt: That's true. He'd sometimes be looking in the mirror, and say things like, "Look at this face. Can you believe they cast me as the lead in this thing?"

Falco: But he was so much fun too. I remember once, shooting an intervention scene (*in Season 4*), when he flipped backwards on an apple box and his feet went up like a very large toddler. He couldn't stop laughing. I couldn't stop laughing. That was him. That was Jimmy.

Van Zandt: He would also quit the show basically every day. [*Laughs*] In TV, you work from 6am 'til 10pm. He was coming from movies, filming two pages a day or whatever. And here we were, doing five, six or seven — four of which would be him and Lorraine in Dr Melfi's office. Heavy scenes. So he was often like, "I can't do this. I cannot do this."

Chase: I was requested to meet him one time at Pier 40 by the Hudson River in the middle of the day when he was going through his "I want to quit" thing. And he said to me that day, "You know what I should have been? I should have been a plumber. That's what I should have been. A plumber." I had several of those

THE TONY SOPRANO FILM CLUB

WHEN HE WASN'T BRANDISHING A BERETTA 85, HE WAS OFTEN WIELDING A REMOTE CONTROL



THE FUGITIVE 1993

In Season 4, Tony acquires a new widescreen TV. He takes it for a test-drive with the Harrison Ford thriller, presumably wondering why an actor in it looks just like Ralph Cifaretto.

SEVEN 1995

"Halfway through it I'm thinking, 'This is bullshit, it's a waste of my fuckin' time, why do I give a fuck who the killer is?'" Tony laments. More of a *Fight Club* guy?

THE DEPARTED 2006

Scorsese famously hasn't seen *The Sopranos*, but Tony does dig Marty's crime epic, enough to enjoy the soundtrack while on a fateful drive in Season 6.

RIO BRAVO 1959

Further proof that Tony is a big Westerns fan (see also his passion for Gary Cooper: "The strong silent type. That was an American...").

THE BIRDS 1963

Tony has a nightmare about a seagull stealing his penis, then blames it on a viewing of this film. Talk about putting the 'cock' in Hitchcock.

THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS 1991

"You'd think I was Hannibal Lecture," Tony moans to Carmela in the pilot. Well, he does enjoy a nice Chianti with his *braciolo*.

THE GODFATHER PART II 1974

It would be a shock if this *wasn't* in his DVD collection. He prefers it to the original, explains Carmela, because "he likes the part where Vito goes back to Sicily".

NICK DE SEMLYEN

MEN IN BLACK 1997

Discussing LaserDiscs with Paulie Walnuts, Tony says he enjoys watching the galaxy-defenders with a bowl of Orville Redenbacher's popcorn.

THE BANK DICK 1940

Rotund '40s actor W.C. Fields is regularly referenced and impersonated by Tony, who's a big fan of this bank-robbery farce.

THE PRINCE OF TIDES 1991

Tony not only watches the Barbra Streisand weepie, but sends Melfi a flower basket with Tide detergent and a card reading, "Prince of Tide". Hot joke!



conversations with him.

Falco: Being Tony wasn't easy.

You mentioned a 25th anniversary party for the cast, Lorraine. Did everyone attend? How emotional was that, missing James and of course having also lost Tony Sirico (Paulie Walnuts) in 2022?

Falco: I was not there, sadly. I was taking my daughter to boarding school. Just like a *Sopranos* episode ('College')...

Bracco: But Edie didn't kill anyone on the way back!

Falco: Ah, well, you don't know that, do you? [Laughs]

Van Zandt: No-one that didn't deserve it, anyway. But yeah, it was really beautiful seeing everyone.

Looking back, what are the episodes or scenes that sum up for you each what is so special about *The Sopranos*?

Bracco: I always absolutely adored Tony Sirico and Michael Imperioli in 'Pine Barrens' as two fish out of water. I thought it was incredible.

Falco: I remember watching the scene where Tony is watching this beautiful woman hanging laundry ('*Isabella*,' Season 1). And his response to her was not one of lasciviousness, though there were certainly plenty of scenes where he was with other women. Here, he was looking at this woman with a love that was a parental sort of love, for ostensibly a mother figure. And I remember being so moved by Jim's performance in that moment, and by how off the beaten track it was for so much else that went on on the show. And I remember just crying, thinking, "Goddamn, the show is good."

Van Zandt: For me, well — my wife (*Maureen*) played my wife on the show (*Gabriella Dante*). But her scenes were always with the girls, mine were always with the guys, and we rarely got a scene together. We had one little part together, though. Tony was in a hospital and my character had to temporarily take over the business, but he was the only character in the show that probably didn't want to be the boss, you know? The scene where Silvio is explaining to Gabriella what had been offered to him and how he turned it down is special to me.

How about for you, David?

Chase: There are two moments. Neither of them is really to do with the show's violence. The opposite, in fact, which says something. There's a scene in which Johnny Sack discovers Ginny's hidden cache of candy and he busts her on it and she starts to cry. She's on her knees. And she says that she knows that the other guys all look at their wives with appreciation. That scene makes me want to cry. The other one is the last scene of the last episode. When I hear 'Don't Stop Believing', when I see Meadow (*Jamie-Lynn Sigler*) running towards that restaurant... it still gets me today. I don't know what it is, whether it's because I know the end is coming, but it gets the emotions even now.

The nature of the TV business, until this point, had been to milk a show for all its worth while it still had an audience. *The Sopranos*, though, went out at the peak of its popularity. How did you know it was time to end the show, David?

Chase: I'll tell you how I knew. [Former HBO CEO] Chris Albrecht came to me and said, "You



Clockwise from main: The episode 'Christopher', written by actor Michael Imperioli (seated right); Real-life and on-screen spouses Steven and Maureen Van Zandt; Gandolfini with Chase; An uneasy family dinner.



“READING THE FINAL SCRIPT, I JUST CRIED.”

EDIE FALCO

need to think of an ending,” two years before the end. He said, “Figure out how many more seasons you can do and come up with an ending.” I said, “An ending? It’s a TV show. You cancel it and it ends!” He was like, “That’s not what we’re doing here. Build towards something.” It never occurred to me there had to be an ending.

Van Zandt: And it became the most

controversial ending in the history of television. People are only just appreciating it now.

Chase: I understand why people were upset. Because I guess most literature throughout history has a conclusion. But as far as I’m concerned, I thought we had a conclusion too...

Falco: When I think of the ending — to this day, I’m embarrassed at the final read-through [of the script] because I could not pull it together. I just cried from the beginning to the end. I don’t like feeling that out of control, but it was not within me to stop. But that’s life, right? You start something. You love something. It ends!

Chase: And that’s what is happening on screen too in that ending, by the way...

David, you recently described *The Sopranos*’ 25th anniversary as a celebration but also a “funeral”, because “something is dying” in the way TV is created and consumed. Is there a way back for the medium?

Chase: It’s all about, as we said in *The Sopranos*, “the fucking cocksucking money”.

Bracco: Corporate greed.

Chase: You’re absolutely right. Corporate greed

and corporate fear — [TV] is ruled by it. And that would need to change.

Van Zandt: It’s not just TV. It’s the corporatisation of the entire artistic world. Same thing in music. Content decisions are being made by bean counters [rather than creatives]. And as a result, all people know now in the entire entertainment industry is to copy what is successful instead of imagining something new. Edie, do you think we could make *The Sopranos* today?

Falco: Well, we’d have to put trigger warnings into every episode.

Van Zandt: Literal trigger warnings! [Laughs]

***The Sopranos* transformed TV — but did the show transform each of you? Are you all different people today, 25 years on, than you would have been had you not been involved?**

Bracco: You know, I feel like I’ve been hit by lightning twice: once with *GoodFellas* and then with *The Sopranos*. I’m so very grateful that I got to work with great people and that I got to play Dr Melfi. So the main change is that I feel very blessed.

Falco: I was having a conversation with somebody recently about art. And how the need to make art is a response to death. You want to make something that will still exist after you’re gone, and if you’re lucky, will still cause an emotional reaction in people. I got choked up talking about this — [pauses] — because as you get older... you start losing friends. Like we lost Jim. You think about [mortality]. Having something that’s gonna live for a long time past your own life — there’s no greater gift. The fact that I tumbled into this project and have this thing that I’m a part of, that will keep me alive beyond my years on this planet — it changes you a bit. It takes this vague sense of desperation out of life. I can relax a little knowing that I was part of this show that was beautiful and keeps renewing interest with each generation.

Van Zandt: I agree with everything Edie just said. For me, *The Sopranos* handed me a new craft (*acting, after decades in music*). I was handed it when I had gone through a major stage of life, kind of wandering in the wilderness. The immortality aspect of *The Sopranos* is helpful in terms of, you know, justifying your existence on the planet. [Laughs] But learning a new craft was a wonderful gift.

Chase: A big part of the show was psychiatry, right? So let me say this. I wish I had been able to [appreciate] the show the way I should have at the time. For whatever reason, I couldn’t then.

Bracco: You needed to come see Dr Melfi! [Laughs]

Chase: But now... I [read a quote] that said: “Gratitude spins at a higher resolution than love.” And I think that’s what it is. I am extremely, extremely grateful to have been part of something that so many people connected to. And are still connecting to. It’s a very special thing. ●

THINK VAMPIRES HAVE
BEEN DONE TO DEATH? YOU
HAVEN'T MET BLOODSUCKING
BALLERINA **ABIGAIL**.

NEW BLOOD

HERE, THE TEAM BEHIND THE
PIROUETTING HEIST-HORROR

TELL US HOW THEY
REIMAGINED TERROR

IN A TUTU

WORDS
TOM ELLEN





TYLER GILLETT AND Matt Bettinelli-Olpin are talking about blood.

There's nothing particularly surprising in this — as the men behind the last two instalments in the *Scream* franchise, the directing duo (collectively known as Radio Silence) are well versed in all things claret. But the amount on display in their latest offering — crime/monster mash-up *Abigail* — looks set to dwarf both those movies combined. We're talking Overlook-Hotel-lift levels of crimson.

"We used a consistent blood recipe on the *Scream* movies," Bettinelli-Olpin tells *Empire*. "But for *Abigail* we needed several different types of blood, so we went with a whole new mix. "Plus," he adds, matter-of-factly, "there was the pool full of corpses. That was another specifically concocted mix of very disgusting ingredients. All food-grade, of course, as the actors had to be submerged in it."

Beside him, his creative partner Gillett nods. "Our thing with blood is: it always has to feel viscous. The minute it feels thin, it's not interesting. We want it to *stick* to you."

Abigail is a vampire movie that's also a heist movie that's also a post-modern black comedy that's also several complex character studies in one. During the course of *Empire*'s interviews with cast and crew, the film is variously compared to *Reservoir Dogs*, *The Haunting*, *Baby's Day Out*, Jordan Peele's *Us*, and "*Home Alone* dialled up to one hundred and eleven". It is an attempt to mould a centuries-old horror trope into something entirely fresh and unique.

"That was the big challenge," says Gillett. "Vampire lore changes so much from movie to movie — it's become so convoluted and the net has been cast so wide. So, how can we feel like we're bringing something truly new to the canon?"

Answering that question would require a grab-bag of disparate influences, a motley crew of top-drawer character actors, a rundown former orphanage, and a 12-year-old ballerina with razor-sharp fangs. Not to mention an *unholy* amount of the red stuff.



The story of *Abigail* begins, appropriately enough, right in Bram Stoker's backyard.

The *Dracula* author was born and raised in Dublin, and it was just a few minutes' walk from his house — and a century or so after his death — that Irish screenwriter Stephen Shields sat down at his laptop to add a twist to Stoker's original recipe. "I've always loved heist movies and horror movies," Shields tells *Empire*. "So, I liked the idea of combining the two. To have *Reservoir Dogs* bumping into a vampire film — that seemed like a fun concept."

Shields set about crafting the US-set tale of a gaggle of small-time crooks tasked with kidnapping a wealthy man's daughter — the titular Abigail — as she returns home from ballet practice, and babysitting her for 24 hours until the ransom money rolls in. A simple enough job — until they discover their tutu-wearing pre-teen cargo is in fact a bloodsucking vampire.

"It's a group of strangers who start off not being so sure of each other," Shields grins, "and soon become even *less* sure of the person they've taken hostage."

The initial draft found its way into the Radio Silence offices just as Gillett and Bettinelli-Olpin were finishing up 2023's *Scream VI*, and hankering after a new challenge. "The hook was so sticky," Gillett says, of Shields' original pitch. "A bunch of kidnappers realising they've made the biggest mistake of their lives." Bettinelli-Olpin adds: "The idea of a young vampire excited us, too. We'd never done a kid lead character before."

The pair brought in frequent collaborator Guy Busick — co-writer on both their *Scream* outings as well as their superbly creepy 2019 horror *Ready Or Not* — to tailor Shields' script to their sensibilities. "It was such a great concept," Busick says. "Vampire mythology has been



Clockwise from top left:

Kidnapper Sammy (Kathryn Newton) is unsure of things that go bump in the night; Vampire Abigail (Alisha Weir) shows Peter (Kevin Durand) how she feels about being snatched; Joey (Melissa Barrera) is in for a bloody awful night; Directors Matt Bettinelli-Olpin (centre) and Tyler Gillett (right) with the crew and Weir (front) on set; Attack mode: Sammy, Frank (Dan Stevens) and Peter are right on cue.

around for centuries, so you can pick and choose the bits you want — and invent new ones — to create this totally fresh kind of monster.”

Rehashing a well-worn cinematic trope also gave the Radio Silence team a chance to do what they did so brilliantly on *Screams V* and *VI* — namely, have their own characters dissect the very subject of cinematic rehashing itself. “*Abigail* does that have ‘meta’ *Scream* flavour to it,” smiles Busick. “The characters commenting directly on the genre of the story they’re in. In reality, if you were trapped with a vampire, your brain would go straight to all the vampire movies and TV shows you’d seen.” Adds Gillett: “There’s this hodgepodge of rules when it comes to vampires: do stakes kill them? Or sunlight? Can they turn to mist? Can they see their reflection? Having the characters reference other vampire movies was a fun way to challenge some of these tropes — and call them out.”

One trope they were very keen to avoid with their own vampire was a lack of proper motivation. “We didn’t want Abigail to just be the ‘evil monster’, chasing people around,” says Bettinelli-Olpin. “She’s a fully-fledged character in her own right, with her own wants and needs and things that make her happy.”

The most prominent of which is ballet.

When Shields first heard which young actor was in the running to play his be-fanged, bloodthirsty creation, he was a tad surprised. “I remember watching [the 2022 Netflix musical] *Matilda*,” he grins. “It was never in my mind that that sweet, innocent girl could rip your throat out.”

As it transpired, though, all-singing, all-dancing *Matilda* star Alisha Weir had been

**"THIS LITTLE GIRL
IS HAVING FUN.
SHE LOVES
PLAYING WITH
HER FOOD."**

**STEPHEN SHIELDS,
WRITER**



wanting to add throat-ripping to her CV for a while. "I have two older sisters, and we all love horror movies," chuckles the 14-year-old, over Zoom from her Dublin home, just a few miles from Shields' (and Stoker's). "It had always been my dream to do a horror film, so when I heard about the [*Abigail*] audition, I wanted it so badly. I'd watch YouTube videos of vampires snarling and growling [fictional, we assume], so I could practise."

The ballet element had been present in the story right from Shields' first draft — Abigail was always heading home from dance class when the kidnappers struck — but when Gillett and Bettinelli-Olpin learned that Weir was classically trained, and had been pirouetting since the age of three, they retooled it as a key part of the character's persona.

"There are lots of dance sequences in the movie," says Weir, "but we also talked about how Abigail uses 'ballet form' even when she's not dancing. Everything she does, she does elegantly. Gracefully. Even when she's doing... *crazy* things."

As well as giving their monster an unorthodox hobby and gait, Radio Silence wanted a whole new aesthetic, too — stepping away from what Gillett dubs "the romantic notion" of the vampire. "We talked about the teeth a lot," he says. "We wanted them to look more primal and animal than usual vampire fangs. Abigail's are a kind of teeth on top of teeth — like a shark's mouth. Those apex predators, when they open their mouth you see they're designed to inflict as much damage as possible."

And since the directors were intent on their leotard-sporting apex predator feeling "practical and biological", that meant Weir had the fangs in *for real*. "It wasn't so bad, actually," she laughs. "It was like wearing a retainer. But sometimes I'd forget to take them out and look in the mirror, like, 'Oh God!' My friends saw the trailer and said, 'We can't look at you the same way anymore!'"

The idea of a dance-obsessed killing machine presenting as a cute young girl may, of course, sound familiar to anyone who saw 2022 horror hit *M3GAN*. But the *Abigail* team are quick to emphasise that the two films are very different animals. "We're huge *M3GAN* fans," says Gillett, "and *Abigail* has that same fun, campy [tone] — but it's also very R-rated. It's not afraid to go places you're maybe not sure you want to go." Bettinelli-Olpin grins: "But, hey, if there's a *M3GAN* v *Abigail* movie somewhere down the line, then no complaints..."

You sense Weir would have few complaints on that front either. As well as "loving" *M3GAN*, she clearly had a ball playing Abigail ("I hope we see lots of Abigails trick-or-treating this Halloween!" she says) — and her genuine enthusiasm for the role only served to make the character more believable. "The great thing about Abigail is that she really *likes* being a vampire," Shields laughs. "In other movies, you might see vampires complaining about it. But this little girl is having *fun*. She loves playing with her food."

Speaking of which — it's time to meet the main courses.

Anyone willing to bundle a 12-year-old into a van for a few million dollars is probably not the most upstanding individual on Earth. But Abigail's kidnappers push wrong'un-ness into previously uncharted territory.

"They are all complicated and *not-good* people," says Melissa Barrera, who plays Joey, and is re-teaming with Radio Silence after starring as Sam Carpenter in *Screams V* and *VI*. "No-one [in the crew] is who they seem. Joey's been assigned the role of taking care of the kid, but she's still very questionable."

Dan Stevens, playing the oily, bespectacled Frank, goes further: "Frank is an awful, awful man," the actor chuckles. "They're this motley group brought together for a heist, and seemingly everyone has a special set of skills. Sam [Kathryn Newton] is good with hacking. Joey is the medic. Angus Cloud's character is our wheels, Kevin Durand's is the muscle. We could never really discern what Frank's skill was, apart from just... being an asshole." "A *foul-mouthed* asshole," Gillett clarifies. "The F-bombs Dan drops in this movie exceed anything we've ever done."

This band of rotters is brought together for the Abigail job by a shadowy crime boss (Giancarlo Esposito), about whose backstory Radio Silence are remaining, well, silent. "Just like the others, [Esposito's character] presents as one person, but he's really someone else," teases Bettinelli-Olpin. "The fun of everyone's arc — including Abigail's — is what they're forced



Clockwise from main: Abigail: a vampire who has all the right moves; Joey and Frank are bloodied but unbowed; Sammy and Abigail get too close for comfort; Sammy goes for a horrifying swim in the indoor 'body' pool.

to reveal once crazy shit starts happening.”

Most of this “crazy shit” happens within the four walls of a large, crumbling mansion — in reality, one named Glenmaroon, on the outskirts of Dublin. Once owned by the Guinness family (and described by Ernest Guinness’ granddaughter Neelia Plunket as “fascinating but hideous”), the house had to feel like, in Gillett’s words, “a character in itself. We scouted a dozen old manor houses in Ireland, but Glenmaroon had such a creepy vibe. It had been an orphanage for a while, then a nunnery. And it’s like a fucking *maze*, man. It took six visits before we had any sense of direction inside it.”

Shields would walk past the house regularly as a child (“There’d be rumours it was haunted, or a witch lived there”), and shooting inside a genuine creepy mansion — rather than a soundstage dressed as one — clearly heightened the movie’s claustrophobic feel. “The energy of the place was definitely weird,” smiles Barrera. “There were strange stories about it. There’s this bridge connecting two bits of the house — apparently one of the owners built it because he had his wife living in one part and his mistress in the other.” Stevens agrees: “It was a creepy, weird place — but it was much creepier

and weirder when we were finished with it.”

The design team decorated every corner of the creaking mansion with unsettling taxidermy, and filled the indoor swimming pool with a healthy batch of what can only be described as ‘corpse soup’. “It was the most disgusting array of stuff I’ve ever seen, and poor Kathryn Newton had to swim in it,” laughs Stevens. “I remember looking out onto the lawn when they were setting up, and there’s just limbs and body bits as far as you can see.”

The movie’s “ridiculous sequence of comeuppances” (to use Stevens’ phrase) culminates in a final action set-piece that was, the actor says, “insanely epic. People flying on wires, huge amounts of blood. Crazy stunts. *Very bloody.*” Indeed, the cast spent most of their time between takes caking themselves with shaving cream to leech off the stage blood. “It’s the only thing that gets it off,” Barrera laughs. “I didn’t mind, though. I honestly like being covered in blood.”

For the directors, the chance to fully slip the leash and go wild — after several years working within the confines of an existing franchise — was refreshing. “We loved making those *Scream* movies,” says Bettinelli-Olpin, “but because of the expectation and the franchise, you’re

constantly having to think about how your movie interacts with the previous ones. On *Abigail*, all we had to think about was, ‘What’s the coolest thing that could happen now? Or the funniest? Or the scariest?’ The goal was to make something that’s truly *ours* — and I think we’ve done that.”

The shoot at Glenmaroon, last summer and autumn, was split in two by the Hollywood actors’ strike. And it was during that pause that tragedy struck, when one of the principal cast members — *Euphoria* star Angus Cloud — passed away from an accidental drug overdose, aged just 25. “It was so sad to [finish the shoot] and not have him there,” says Barrera. “He was such a special actor and we all loved on him so hard. We really embraced him and cheered him on.” Stevens feels the same: “I’d never met anyone like him. For all of us, he became like a little brother, and we cared about him very deeply.” Gillett adds, “Everything Angus did was so fucking funny and interesting and *genuine*. You couldn’t take your eyes off him — it was a superpower. So, I hope we’ll do him justice with this movie. He’s so good in it.”

Beyond the deep sadness they clearly all feel over losing Cloud, what really comes across is how tight the *Abigail* team have become. Long after filming finished, the ‘AbiGang’ WhatsApp group (“Good name, right?” grins Gillett) continues to chime away regularly. “With the *Screams* and now *Abigail*, we’ve accidentally become ‘ensemble guys,’” Bettinelli-Olpin laughs. “But for us, a movie’s not worth doing unless you walk away with a new group of friends.”

And this time: a new kind of monster, too. “You’ve never seen a vampire like this before,” Barrera promises. “It’s different and disgusting and *wild*.” Plus, as previously elucidated, it’s not just *Abigail*’s F-bomb count that blows past anything Radio Silence have previously done. “The amount of blood Matt and Tyler like is honestly insane,” states Barrera, shaking her head. “I genuinely think there might be more blood in this movie than in any movie ever made.”

Stock up on shaving cream now.

ABIGAIL IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 APRIL



THE HEAVYWEIGHT FIGHT



NOBODY HAD
SCREEN PRESENCE LIKE
CARL WEATHERS.
WHETHER TAKING ON ROCKY OR
THE PREDATOR, OR GETTING
LAUGHS AT HIS OWN EXPENSE,
HE ALWAYS COMMANDED OUR
ATTENTION. WITH HIS UNTIMELY
DEATH LAST MONTH,
WE CELEBRATE
THE CHAMP'S
SINGULAR CAREER

EMPIRE

Here: The iconic Apollo Creed fights adversary Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) in *Rocky II* (1979).

Below right: Psyching himself up to enter the ring in 1976's *Rocky*.



THE CHARISMA

Rocky I-IV (1976-'85)

CARL WEATHERS BECAME Apollo Creed the moment he walked through the door to audition for *Rocky*. After reading for the part with Sylvester Stallone, he announced, "I could do a lot better if you got me a real actor to work with." But unknowingly insulting the film's lead didn't count against him; instead, it proved he was the only man for the job.

Though Apollo Creed began as Rocky Balboa's opponent, we couldn't help but love such a charismatic heavyweight champion of the world. He set the bar for Rocky because he defined greatness. And so too did Weathers: with his braggadocio, his physicality, his sensitivity, his humour, he created a character as formidable as he was likeable. In just a handful of scenes, Weathers leaves his mark in the first *Rocky*, making Apollo feel real, both human and mythic.

He could have been a one-dimensional villain, a crude caricature of Muhammad Ali, but Weathers added layers to him with every entry in the franchise, convincingly growing him from a perfect foil and adversary into Rocky's mentor, friend, and fiercest supporter. He was so believable as the Master Of Disaster that Ali himself challenged him to fight whenever the pair crossed paths.

From the get-go, Apollo's a consummate showman with a twinkle in his eye, but by *Rocky III* and *Rocky IV*, he revealed vulnerability, too. He tells Rocky: "You know, Stallion? It's too bad we gotta get old, huh?" It's a line Weathers delivers playfully, not with pathos or self-pity. That fear of growing old, of no longer being on top, leads to his demise in the ring at the hands of Dolph Lundgren's indestructible Ivan Drago — their star-spangled match feels as high-stakes as the Cold War itself, a Shakespearean tragedy that plays out in the ring. The look on his face when he touches gloves with Drago expresses everything: he knows what's coming, but Apollo never backs down. Weathers wanted to make us

feel the weight of losing Apollo, that the fighter is still in him even in his final moments — his performance is so realistic that doctors on set thought he'd really been hurt.

The *Rocky* saga still orbits Apollo's bright star, its new phase centring on his son, Michael B. Jordan's Adonis Creed. Apollo's — and Weathers' — presence, inextricably linked, is felt even now: when Adonis shadow-boxes an old video of his father projected on the wall behind him, the actor remains spellbinding even as a flickering image.

When promoting the 1975 bout between Ali and Chuck Wepner, the historic fight that inspired *Rocky*, Don King declared, "People have been known to transcend their earthly stature in the middle of the ring. We could have a miraculous happening!" The same held true for Carl Weathers, who transcended his earthly stature within moments of his first appearance as Apollo Creed, instantly establishing an incandescent screen presence, a larger-than-life icon who represented all the magic and magnitude of the American dream. **PRISCILLA PAGE**





Above:
Dillon is tooled
up and ready
for a rumble in
the Val Verde
jungle in
Predator.

THE TEAMMATE

Predator (1987)

"DILLON! YOU SUNUVABITCH." The sweaty slap of palm on palm. The swell of gigantic, vein-mapped biceps straining against fabric. Were a study to be commissioned, it's likely scientists would conclude that Weathers' arm-wrestle with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the opening minutes of *Predator* contains the highest concentration of pure testosterone ever recorded. An absurdly macho display, it is a scene charged with so much masculine energy, rumour has it every living creature within a five-mile radius spontaneously grew a moustache. But Weathers' contribution to John McTiernan's iconic rumble in the jungle was far more than just giving Arnold someone to flex with.

While the majority of *Predator*'s henchmen were lesser-known faces, Weathers set combat-booted foot in the fictional jungle of Val Verde a bona fide movie star. Riding high off the back of four *Rocky* films, he drew even more glances from the locals than his Austrian co-star. But Apollo Creed didn't come cheap, McTiernan having to stare down Fox bean-counters in order to recruit Weathers for the mission. "It was really a way to help Arnold," recalled McTiernan in 2020. "Arnold had most of his scenes with Carl Weathers, and acting is really reacting. If you can play a scene with somebody who's really good, they make *you* good."

So Weathers tooled up. Alongside wild man Sonny Landham, Wrestlermaniac Jesse Ventura,

Commando's Bill Duke, former Marine Richard Chaves, and scrawny screenwriter Shane Black, he strapped on a machine gun and followed Schwarzenegger's Dutch into hell. As company man Dillon, he shouldered the film's most nuanced role: Dutch's friend, who sells him out for a political agenda, only to embark on a redemption arc that results in him sacrificing his own life for a virtual stranger. Weathers brought a dignified nobility to the part, one that could easily have been reduced to a weaselly cypher in less capable hands. In a platoon of none-more-swole bros, Weathers stood out — despite packing the movie's weediest gun.

McTiernan's Schwarzenegger gambit also paid off, Arnold gravitating towards his co-star and raising his game to meet the bar Weathers set. "Every time Carl was working, Arnold was over in the corner of the set, watching," said the director. "I never had to say a word. I just put Carl in Arnold's way, and it worked out. Arnold's performance in that was better than in any of the movies he'd done before."

In the frame, he elevated every scene. Outside it, he trolled his co-stars with spectacular verve, breaking into Arnold's private gym before dawn to pump iron, then insisting his bulging physique was a Reacher-like gift of genetics. After hours, he would lead the charge, too, tearing it up at Puerto Vallarta night spot La Jungla (literally 'The Jungle'), where he'd bust moves to James Brown's 'Living In America', driving the Mexican crowd wild. In a film that redefined the term 'man-power', Weathers was The Man. And while Old Painless might be the showstopper, Carl Weathers remains *Predator*'s secret weapon. **JAMES DYER**



THE FORCE

Action Jackson (1988)

Name: Jericho Jackson.

Nickname: 'Action'.

Home: Detroit.

Profession: Cop.

Education: Harvard Law.

Hobby: Fighting crime.

Weapon: You're looking at 'em.

So goes the poster tagline for *Action Jackson*, a project dreamed up by Weathers himself on the sun-baked set of *Predator*. And it certainly reflects the vibe of the movie it's advertising, the actor's first-ever solo vehicle. *Action Jackson* is no piece of art — in fact, it makes *Commando* look like cinema vérité — but it is a hugely likeable showcase for Weathers' charm and physicality. Eager to recapture the badass essence of the blaxploitation movies he loved, for his first leading role he devised the eponymous cop, a lawman so formidable that he doesn't even carry a gun. "You nearly tore that boy's arm off," laments Jackson's captain early on. "So?" he shrugs. "He had a spare."

This is a film so deliriously daft that *Action's* nemesis is an evil auto magnate played by Craig T. Nelson. (And yes, it does climax with a duel in which he kickboxes Weathers.) There is a sequence in which our hero says, "I have to catch a cab," then successfully outruns a speeding taxi with a villain inside; during the shoot, Weathers spent a 12-hour day solely bombing it down a street at full velocity. There are also flames. So many flames. "Once you've been torched, it's kinda hard to get a lot of roles," Weathers, who had been required to get extremely close to more than one fireball, wryly contemplated on the film's press circuit. "Unless you're going to play an ember in a fireplace."

Yet despite the non-stop havoc, the standard Joel-Silver-picture quips ("How do you like your ribs?" asks Jackson, before exploding a foe's torso with an Arwen 37 Rotary Grenade Launcher), and the title character's rippling muscles, the real appeal of *Action Jackson* is just how mellow he is throughout. He's simultaneously an unstoppable force of nature and a guy who looks like he's just sauntered out of a day spa. It's riffed on in the film itself, with perps fed myths about his ferociousness, only to discover that he's as genial as a concierge. And it's what makes Weathers' character stand apart from other '80s one-man-armies, played by the likes of Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Gibson.

It's a great cinematic 'what if' — what would have happened if *Action Jackson* had been more successful? We would have gotten sequels, and likely other big starring roles for the actor. He certainly deserved them. Instead, despite those who did catch it apparently shouting, "Go get 'em, Jackson!" at the screen, he ended up migrating to TV instead. It's a shame. But seek out *Action Jackson* and you'll find that energy still emanates from the screen, Weathers creating flames all of his own. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

Here: Cop Jericho Jackson in action (1988).
Below right: Sending himself up in *Arrested Development* episode 'Marta Complex' (2004).



THE WIT

Arrested Development (2004-'13)

IT STARTED AS a tired joke, and ended as a great one. When the producers of *Arrested Development* got in touch with Carl Weathers to take a part in their surreal family psychodrama, they did so for the obvious reason: they were planning a *Rocky* pastiche. What could be funnier than Weathers, back in the short-shorts and belly top, running on the beach with one of the Bluths? But the actor had other ideas. "It's not going to be just a bunch of *Rocky* jokes, is it?" he asked Mitch Hurwitz. The showrunner claimed that nothing could be further from his mind!

While Hurwitz tried to conjure up another approach, Weathers pitched his own idea: he should play himself as a huge cheapskate. Hurwitz loved it, and it's that version that goes down in sitcom history. So it is that David Cross' Tobias books a stage-fighting class with Weathers, which the actor misses because he got himself bumped from a flight to get some compensation. The two meet on a miserably overcrowded airport shuttle, where the *Rocky* star agrees to train Tobias in return for his last \$1,100. Unfortunately for Tobias' prospects, most of Weathers' hot tips concern the best ways to save or scam money.

Weathers bonds with family matriarch Lucille (Jessica Walter) — they meet while scavenging forgotten wine during a distracting brawl — and romances her neighbour Lucille 2 (Liza Minnelli). He strings the hapless Tobias along for all he's worth, bribing him in an attempt to bag the Bluth family's life-rights for a show he's directing called 'Scandalmakers'. It

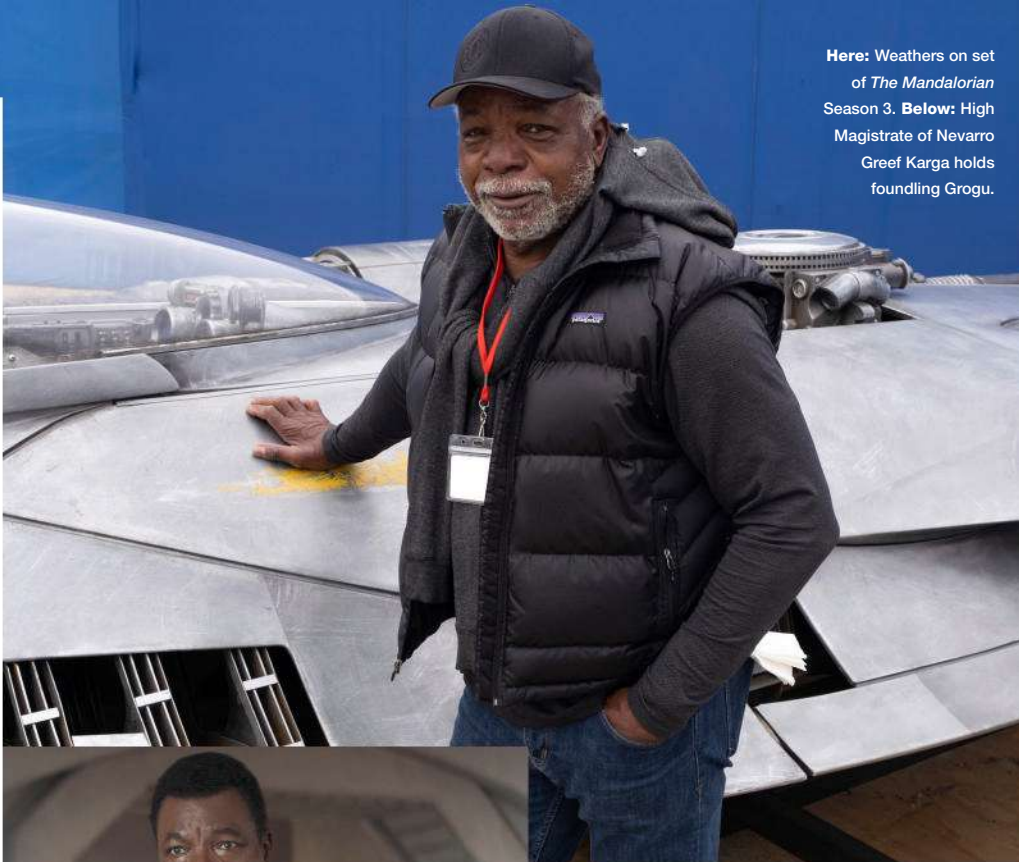


transpires that he lied to his producing partners about securing those rights, creating a disaster for the show. Which then inspires an episode of 'Scandalmakers' about his failure, called "'Weathers' Permit-ing": The *Scandalmakers' Maker's Scandal*. Weathers not only signs off on that, but directs it. What, like he's going to turn down a payday?

It all works precisely because it's so at odds with our image of Weathers. From Apollo Creed to *Predator's* Dillon, this was a guy who is expansive, sure of himself, authoritative. Weathers seemed like a guy who eats prime steak with all the trimmings; not the guy who grabs a stripped rib from your hands because it could still make a stew (*Arrested Development's* Weathers loves a stew).

The role was an inspired play on his lifelong hard-man image and it succeeds because it's unexpected, in a way that a crop top never could be. It's a crying shame he didn't do more comedy roles, because his willingness to send himself up was a delightful punctuation to his own stupendousness. **HELEN O'HARA**

Here: Weathers on set of *The Mandalorian* Season 3. Below: High Magistrate of Nevarro Greef Karga holds foundingling Grog.



THE LEADER

The Mandalorian (2020-'23)

"AHHHH! MANDO!"

So went a typically cheerful and boisterous greeting from Weathers' Greef Karga in *The Mandalorian*. In addition to helping coin the coolest nickname in the galaxy — one that the internet quickly adopted — Weathers brought innate swagger and quiet strength to the Bounty Hunters' Guild leader turned High Magistrate of Nevarro. It made him immediately likeable, even when he and the titular hero were more frenemies than friends.

That alone would surely have been enough to secure Weathers' *Star Wars* legacy. But perhaps even more impressive were his achievements behind the camera. He directed two demanding episodes — Season 2's *The Siege*, and Season 3's *The Foundling* — and both proved how skilled he was at balancing all the different elements that make *Star Wars* so special.

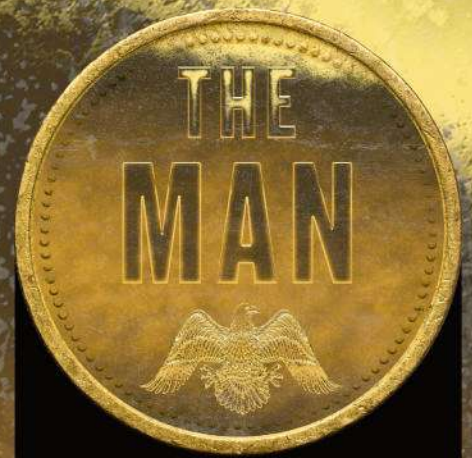
One of those ingredients is kick-ass action, and multiple sequences in Weathers' episodes do the franchise proud. A climactic dogfight between Mando's Razor Crest and the Empire's TIE Fighters is thrilling, full of triumphant

moments that are delivered with directorial flair — cutting Ludwig Göransson's score only to have it return just as Mando fires a kill-shot was especially inspired. And another scene in which Ahmed Best's lightsaber-wielding Kellran Beq rescues Grog from the Jedi Temple is a precisely calibrated, fast-paced chase that evokes the iconography of the prequels with style.

It makes sense that an action star with Weathers' CV knew exactly how to make an action sequence tick. Because crucially, it was never just action for action's sake. He always squeezed character and emotion out of even the smallest moments, subtly evolving the relationships between characters and helping to illuminate the bigger picture, never content to have his episodes simply be jaunty side-quests.

It helps that Weathers was a natural when it came to nailing *The Mandalorian's* comedy beats. Not only was he frequently hilarious on screen, but his warm and winning comedic energy also comes through in his direction. Many of his funniest moments involve Grog — one memorable scene has everyone's favourite Baby Yoda use the Force to snare a macaron from an unsuspecting kid, while another has Mando trying to repair his ship with his adopted son to no avail. While other episodes have leaned on Grog's natural cuteness too much, Weathers' comic beats don't outstay their welcome, landing to maximum effect.

Of course, Weathers wasn't shy about putting himself on camera either, making sure to get in his fair share of heroic moments. And even though time may have slowed him down, nothing could dull his charisma and action chops. Scenes where he's running down corridors blasting away at Stormtroopers and quipping with Mando showcased that even in a galaxy far, far away, he was still right at home. Whether in front of or behind the camera, the universe is less fun without him in it. **AMON WARMANN**



WE REMEMBER MEETING THE CHAMP HIMSELF...

THE LEGENDARY LIVERPOOL manager, Bill Shankly, once invited reporters to meet his new signing, a Scottish giant named Ron Yeats. "Take a walk around my centre half," Shanks said. "Go on, walk around him." I felt much the same way when I met Carl Weathers in 2017, when he came to the *Empire* offices for a podcast interview. I knew going in that he would be large, of course. You don't trade blows with Sly Stallone and go bicep to bicep with Arnie without being exceptionally pumped. But few things prepare you for meeting Weathers in the flesh. He was on the verge of turning 70, but was strong, powerful, packed into a sharp suit, with a handshake that could grind bone to dust. Walk around him? Sure. I'll set aside a week.

But the real joy of speaking to Carl Weathers, as I would do a couple more times, was in his joy. Madly charming and funny, you could see the forceful personality that persuaded Stallone to not only give him the role of Apollo Creed, but to keep him around for a few *Rocky* films. When I first met him he was totally at ease, promoting *Chicago Justice*, in which he had a role that didn't require him to punch anyone, and you could tell that he was enjoying what he thought was his second act.

Chicago Justice, cancelled after one season, was not to be Weathers' second act: thankfully, *The Mandalorian* fulfilled that particular function. When I spoke to him again in 2020, he was positively vibrating, even across Zoom, at this unexpected chapter. Who knows where that might have taken him, but the career he had — Apollo, Dillon, Action Jackson, Greef Karga, and more — wasn't too bad. Walk around him.

CHRIS HEWITT





BATTLE LINES



WITH HIS NEW ACTION THRILLER

CIVIL WAR, WRITER-DIRECTOR

ALEX GARLAND PRESENTS A RAVAGED

AMERICA IN DISARRAY. IN A PIECE WRITTEN

EXCLUSIVELY FOR *EMPIRE*, HE EXPLAINS WHERE IT CAME FROM,

HOW HE DID IT, AND WHY IT'S MORE RELEVANT BY THE DAY

WORDS **ALEX GARLAND**



I STARTED WRITING CIVIL WAR

IN JUNE 2020, A FEW
MONTHS AFTER COVID
ARRIVED, AND A FEW
MONTHS BEFORE
THE FIRST TRUMP/BIDEN
ELECTION. I HAD THREE
MAIN AIMS.

I wanted to make something non-afraid. I wanted the heroes to be a throwback to an old form of journalism. And I wanted to make an attack on political polarisation.

First drafts come in two forms for me. One, the script pours out fast, and the experience of writing blurs with the experience of watching a film. The room feels darker, and I can see the scenes and shot compositions more clearly than I can see my laptop screen. It seems more like transcription than writing. In the back of my mind, I often find myself wondering, "What's going to happen next?", as if I don't have input into the narrative.

The second form is slow and laborious. No page or scene comes without disproportionate effort. There's no cinema effect; there's courier-font words on a Final Draft screen. I re-write the same scene endlessly, and single lines of stage direction have hundreds of variants. It feels more like editing than writing, and still feels as if I don't have input into the narrative, but for different reasons.

In the end, I don't (personally) see a quality difference between the different forms of writing. Some of my scripts are better than others, but it isn't the speed of the writing that separates them. *Ex Machina*, *28 Days Later*, *Sunshine*, and *Devs* were all fast scripts — written in around a fortnight (*Devs*, about a fortnight per episode, over three months of mania). *Annihilation*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *Dredd* were slow scripts, and took several months each.

Civil War was in the poured-out category. The first draft took just over a week, and I think I never had a clearer sense of watching a film while writing it. It was hallucinatory.

I was living in Gloucestershire at the time. After the script was done, I went for



a walk in the fields. I remember watching bees work around some meadow flowers, growing alongside a decaying building. Eighty years ago, the building was part of a Second World War airfield. Not far away, the runway still existed, just about. It was almost broken to pieces by weed growth and more meadow flowers. My grandmother, I was told, used to hang around by a small waterfall outside the local pub, and flirt with the airmen.

These relics of the older war, the one that contains all the lessons that should be warding us against metastatic vitriol and division, felt very strange. Incredible, to lose a lesson that was so hard won.

WAR CONTAINS COMBAT, AND COMBAT, in a sense, is action. Cinema loves action.

If I think 'anti-war' films, I think *Paths Of Glory* and *Come And See*. *Paths Of Glory* is a film about the lunatic reasoned unreason of war. *Come And See* uses surrealism to be truthful about horror. Both are beautifully made, and also leave you with anger and the never-again conviction.

But they are pretty unusual in that. It's a cinema truism that most anti-war movies are not anti-war, whatever stance they appear to take. They may contain violence, but score

and camera tricks make them seductive or operatic. They create exhilarating set-pieces, then use tragedy positionally, to off-set the glorification. *Apocalypse Now* is stunning filmmaking, but right from the hypnotic opening frames, blossoming napalm and ceiling fans, it's too enjoyable to be anti.

The problem, obviously, is that war stories mainline so many of cinema's superpowers: the collision of music, violence, scale, danger — all safe, all vicarious. So in part, it's a problem of balance, between the intention of the film, and the tools available. As a filmmaker, you want the tools. You want the strange beauty of destruction, because destruction is beautiful, and you want the action adrenaline, because adrenaline is contained in danger. You just don't want to end up accidentally making *Triumph Of The Will*.

Covid restrictions meant that the process of moving *Civil War* from script to pre-production took around two years. So I had plenty of time to think about the war/anti-war problem, as did the various other filmmakers that started joining the project — by which I primarily mean the crew.

From here on, any observation I make is probably not my own, but the product of exchanges with the camera department,





Clockwise from here:
Callee Spaeny and Kirsten Dunst play photojournalists Jessie and Lee, who are documenting the war; Jessie gets in the thick of things; Lee has an illuminating time; Wagner Moura plays Joel, a reporter working alongside Lee; Writer-director Alex Garland gives direction on set.

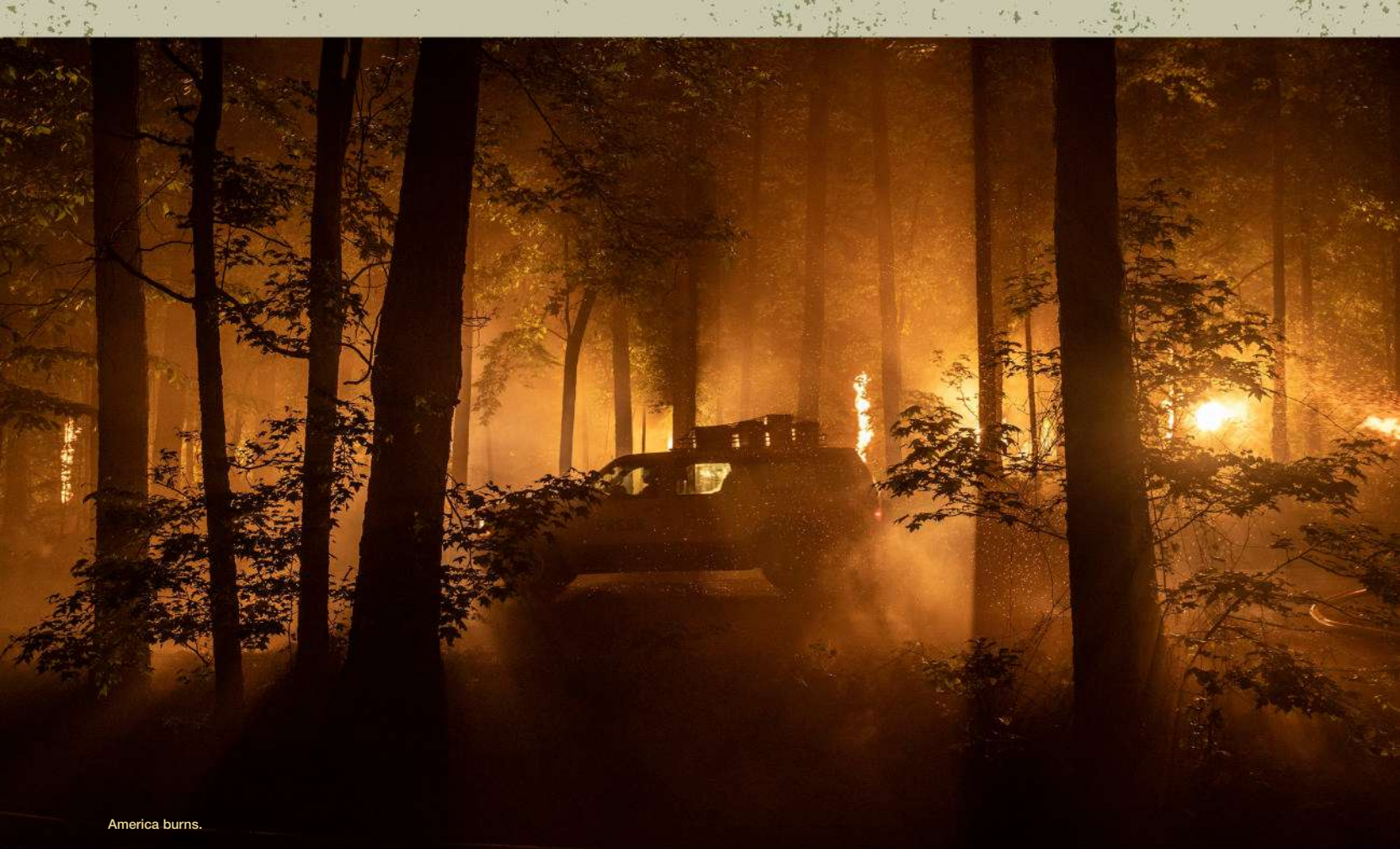


or stunt team, or SFX team, or gaffer, or producer, or editor, and so on. I don't yet know whether our conversations reached the right conclusions, but I can say it was constantly on our minds.

ONE OF OUR FIRST POINTS OF discussion was the depiction of violence.

Cinema develops behaviours that do not relate to the real world. Most film viewers have examples that bump them — the way people talk on the phone, or make too much eye-contact with passengers while driving. My personal bump is the way very-hungry-people are required to become feral and eat with their fingers, hunching their shoulders, darting their eyes suspiciously. It's... ridiculous.

But it's violence where reality and cinema move furthest apart. It's not just that violence is often offered up as both the problem and the solution to the problem, or as an action without consequence. It's also as actual, literal depiction. It's equivalent to a film grammar where birds are typically shown without wings, and fly around the sky like little rocket ships.



America burns.

The trading of punches to the face, exploding cars, silent silenced pistols — all wingless birds. But the one we focused on related to people being shot.

This is what we often see: the sudden explosive hole in fabric or skin, the puffs of red mist, the bodies that snap backwards as if yanked by a cable, the blood spray up the wall behind, or the person standing beside. It's not to say that these things never happen — just as, I guess, hungry people do sometimes turn feral. But as a core grammar, it's misleading. And it is a core grammar. Some time after the release and success of *Bonnie And Clyde*, blood squibs became ubiquitous — until VFX took over, decades later, and did the same thing without the frustrating reset times on set.

A truer grammar would be: when people are shot, they fall over. No opera. No blood money-shot. They just collapse. This feels sadder and simpler, and more shocking than the version we have become used to. And I suspect we know this without having to know it. So, a viewer might never have seen someone get shot, but they will sense that one depiction is truer than another, even if they don't know why.

Civil War's stunt coordinator was a guy called Jeff 'Dash' Dashnaw. Dash is an interesting man, made up of almost pure contradictions. Brutish, refined, polite, coarse, tough, subtle, good-natured. I think, mainly, he's highly intelligent and very professional. And very tall.

Dash embraced the concept of realism immediately, and went about making it happen, and making other people make it

happen. He also brought in an extremely experienced military advisor — an ex-Navy SEAL called Ray Mendoza.

Between the two of them, they worked across departments and choreographed action and combat scenes, designed to target the viewer's internal sense of reality. They also suggested moments or sequences that didn't exist in the script, such as a journalist being knocked into a body pit, or mortar teams setting up on rooftops.

For me, one of the most interesting things they did was to construct extended action sequences in a way that could be filmed in real time, from multiple angles. This gave Jake Roberts (the editor) and I the chance to cut sequences in ways that included textural reality, such as strange pauses or silences. The best example of this is towards the very end of the film, during a combat sequence in which soldiers fight their way through rooms and corridors. Ray brought in several ex-Navy SEAL colleagues to play the soldiers, and together they added their own dialogue and actions. I think it's among the most successful sequences I've ever been involved with filming, and I had only a peripheral role in creating it.

MUSIC IS ANOTHER IMPORTANT element in the war/anti-war tone. Going back to the opening frames of *Apocalypse Now*, it's not all napalm and ceiling fans. It's also The Doors. The images are almost supernaturally well-judged in the photography and editing, but the addition of The Doors creates harmony. It's darkly blissful. Darkly devotional.

Jake Roberts, Geoff Barrow and Ben Salisbury (the composers) and I spent months experimenting with different cues and needle drops, trying to find where the balance lay for this film and its aims.

Not to take away anyone's input, because everyone had a say, and everyone solved a seemingly impossible problem at one point or another, but I think the influence of Geoff Barrow was particularly important here. Geoff has a radiating effect, partly because he's so blunt, but also because his instincts lean into discordance. Discordance, counter-intuitively, doesn't preclude harmony. It just makes for a weird harmony. Geoff calls it 'wrongness', but he means it, and feels it, as rightness.

My personal favourite wrongness that we collectively reached was the use of a De La Soul track during an execution sequence. It is, in my opinion at least, cinematically harmonious. It's also so jarring and confronting, in the blaring intro and the wrongness-timing, and wrongness-tone, that it's borderline picking a fight with the audience.

It addressed something at the heart of the film. *Civil War* is trying to engage and communicate, but it's not trying to please.

I RELY HEAVILY ON LONG-STANDING creative collaborations. I've never been credited as a director without Sonoya Mizuno in the cast (who has an oddly similar instinct and influence to Geoff Barrow). Likewise without Allon Reich and Andrew Macdonald as producers, or Glenn Freemantle as sound designer, or Asa Shoul as colourist.



Top to bottom:
Explosive times
as the US attacks
itself; Seasoned
correspondent
Sammy, played by
Stephen McKinley
Henderson, surveys the
scene; Lee heads
out into the night;
Abandoned
vehicles on an
American freeway.



One of the most fundamental of these collaborations is Rob Hardy, the director of photography. I don't create a shot-list before arriving on set, and seeing the actors rehearse. The shot-list is created between Rob and me, usually in the five to ten minutes after watching the rehearsal. We frequently see the same frame at the same time, and indicate it to each other with a glance, pointed finger, and lens size expressed as a number. And equally frequently (or more frequently), I don't see the frame at all, but I know Rob has, by the way he is moving with the finder.

Rob and I took a few creative risks on this film, but maybe the biggest related to hardware. We knew we needed to shoot quickly, and move the camera quickly, and wanted something truthful in the camera behaviour, that would not over-stylise the war imagery. All of which push you towards handheld. But we didn't want it to feel too handheld, because the movie needed at times a dreamlike or lyrical quality, which pushes you towards tracks and dollies.

Then, just a few weeks before active pre-production started, a strange new camera arrived on the market — the DJI Ronin 4D. It's small, light, has a full-frame sensor, and it does something incredibly useful. It self-stabilises, to a level that you control — from silky-smooth to vérité shaky-cam. To me, that is revolutionary in the same way that Steadicam was once revolutionary. It's a beautiful tool. Not right for every movie, but uniquely right for some.

It was uniquely right for *Civil War*. The final part of the filmmaking puzzle — because the small size and self-stabilisation means that the camera behaves weirdly like the human head. It sees 'like' us. That gave Rob and I the ability to capture action, combat, and drama in a way that, when needed, gave an extra quality of being there.

(Just an aside to any filmmakers reading this, particularly if working on a budget — really, check this camera out. We shot on the 6K variant, and it gave us images that stand up to being shown on IMAX screens. And the camera costs about £5k.)

IT TOOK A LITTLE UNDER FOUR YEARS, from the first draft of *Civil War* to the planned release. In the intervening time, none of the polarisation concerns that motivated the movie have diminished. All of the concerns have significantly worsened.

Yet. Among the people that made the movie, there was a broad political spectrum. We collaborated, solved problems, joked, confided, had beers together, and had each other's backs. Speaking for myself, about my colleagues of opposite political persuasion, I liked them, respected them, learned from them, felt grateful for them, and would work with them again like a shot.

We hope you enjoy the film. 🍷

CIVIL WAR IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 APRIL

the EMPIRE Deep Dive

IN OUR REGULAR SERIES, WE EXPLORE
A SLICE OF CINEMA LORE

THIS MONTH

THE AD-LAND ALL-STARS

WORDS ADAM SMITH

 THE RED DRESS

THE REVOLUTION STARTED WITH A KEBAB.

Sometime in the early 1970s, three men met in a Turkish restaurant in London's Fitzrovia and set in motion a train of events that would change Hollywood forever. David Puttnam, Charles Saatchi and Alan Parker were all former colleagues at the legendary advertising agency Collett Dickenson Pearce. In the previous decade, they had been key in upending the then moribund world of commercials, transforming it from a dull cultural backwater into a white-hot creative powerhouse.

CDP had produced some of the most memorable print and TV commercials of all time. The long-running Cinzano campaign, in which Leonard Rossiter dumped vermouth over Joan Collins with the satisfying regularity of Wile E. Coyote falling off a cliff, and Hovis' sentimental trip down a cobbled Northern street to the strains of a brass band, were both from CDP. Happiness had become a cigar named Hamlet, and Heineken refreshed the parts other beers couldn't reach, all thanks to their world-beating creative teams.

And now, together with a small group of fellow ad-men — Ridley and Tony Scott, Hugh Hudson and Adrian Lyne — these three CDP alumni were about to take everything they'd learned in ad-land and apply it to the movies. The results would be a host of films that would define Hollywood for a decade and beyond. *Alien*, *Flashdance*, *Top Gun*, *Midnight Express*, *The Hunger*, *Blade Runner*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Bugsy Malone*, *9 1/2 Weeks*, *Chariots Of Fire* — all would have the creative DNA of these London advertising men wound inextricably through them.

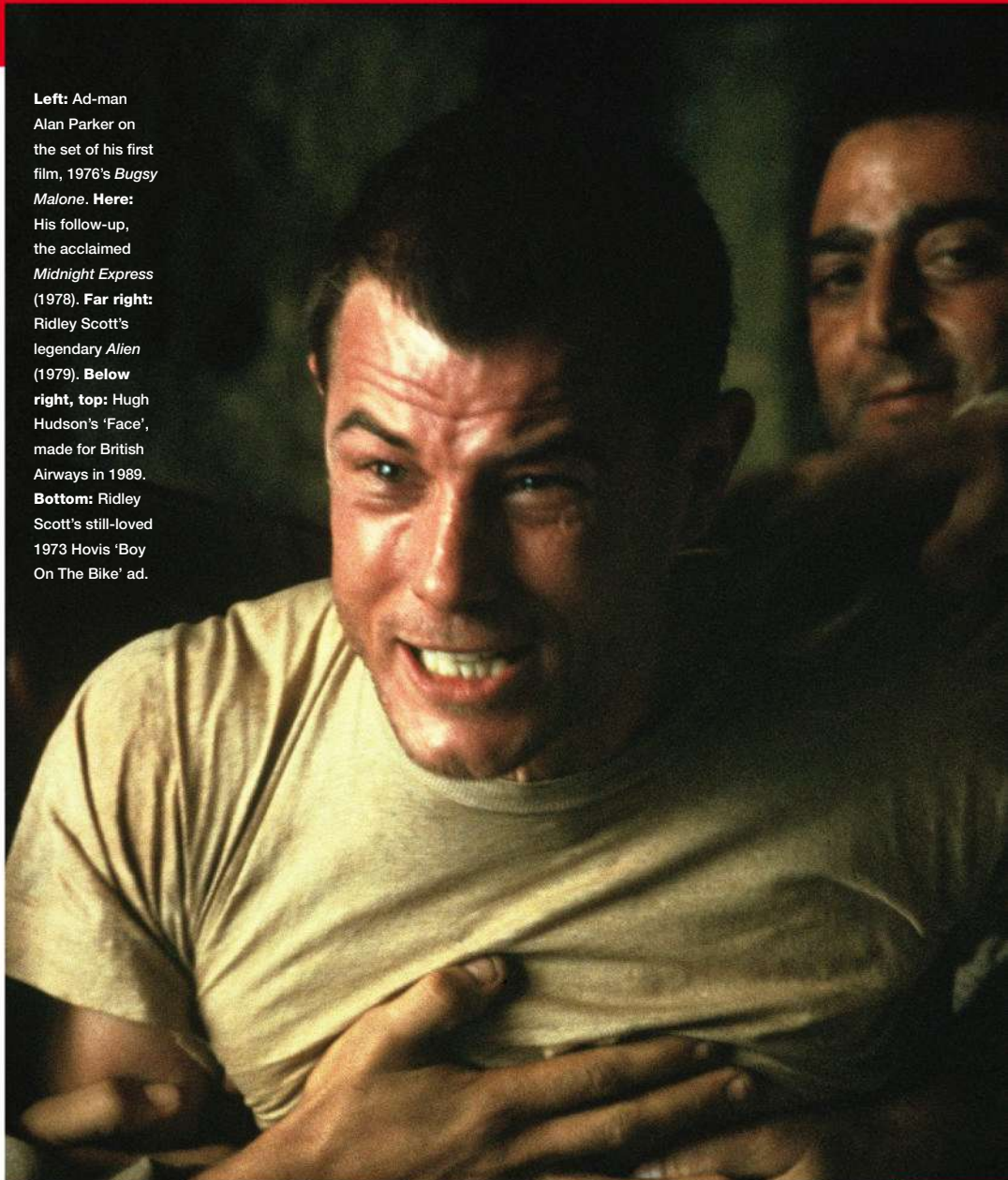
But that was in the future. When Parker sat down at the Kebab & Hummus on Charlotte Street, he was a flourishing commercials director with his own company and had, perhaps, expected nothing more than a pleasant reunion — maybe a re-run of the legendary lunches that CDP had become famous for, boozy epics that often stretched into the evening, occasionally into next week.







Left: Ad-man Alan Parker on the set of his first film, 1976's *Bugsy Malone*. **Here:** His follow-up, the acclaimed *Midnight Express* (1978). **Far right:** Ridley Scott's legendary *Alien* (1979). **Below right, top:** Hugh Hudson's 'Face', made for British Airways in 1989. **Bottom:** Ridley Scott's still-loved 1973 Hovis 'Boy On The Bike' ad.



But David Puttnam had grander plans. And he was about to unveil them. "Tell him, David!" Charles Saatchi gushed as the threesome sat down, before ignoring Puttnam and telling him himself. "We're going to *discover* you!"

"Why don't I discover *you*," replied Parker, with a little of his reflexive chippiness.

"Alan, we're going to change your life. We're going into the film industry," Puttnam said. "You're going to write a script, Charles is going to write a script. I'm going to get the money together."

"But I've never written anything longer than 30 seconds in my life!" Parker objected.

"That doesn't matter," Puttnam said. "We believe in you."

Parker mulled over the offer. He'd fallen into directing pretty much by accident in the first place. He'd been, at heart, a copywriter, a crafter of vignettes about frozen burgers or sherry that resonated with mass audiences, that *connected*, in a way adverts had never done before. Then again, 30 seconds, and an hour-and-a-half... what's the difference?

Maybe this film idea had something to it.

When David Puttnam had arrived at CDP in 1962, British advertising was a backwater, a home for second-raters, also-rans and misfits, and a career that you didn't boast about having fallen into. "If you had any kind of education you went into the theatre or you went into television or business. Advertising was just rather vulgar," Parker told the BBC in 2002. "But that's what led to the revolution. We had very little education, but advertising was incredibly egalitarian." As Puttnam said: "None of us had been to university, we didn't have a degree between us. But we were smart. We understood the world we were living in."

Back in the '50s and early '60s, advertising was often an afterthought. Space in magazines or on billboards was bought and then filled with not much more than a black-and-white shot of the product, the price, and a line of copy that was, at best, the result of half an hour's light writing over lunch. But, led by CDP's legendary creative director Colin Millward, Puttnam, Parker and Saatchi brought unprecedented creativity, wit and focus to the industry.

Parker's ads, which filled the glossy pages of the newly minted Sunday supplements, were

bold, funny and talked to the reader in an unprecedented, familiar, friendly way. "The last of the big suspenders," ran the headline for Pretty Polly hold-up stockings ("And there's no suspender like no suspender"); "Iced Cream" was his line for Harvey's Bristol Cream sherry, accompanying an unthinkable shocking shot of the then resolutely middle-class tippie with a couple of ice cubes plonked in it. "I've spent a decade putting this product on a pedestal and now you're selling it off the back of a barrow," a delighted Millward told Parker, as sherry sales shot through the roof.

The coming of colour television had galvanised the TV market and Parker's scripts were as impactful as his print ads. He wrote little domestic dramas, set in recognisably working-class homes. He mined British class anxieties for Cockburn's Port, putting the steerage passengers alongside the officers in a lifeboat and allowing them to bond over the joys of fortified wine. A commercial for Birds Eye beefburgers, 'Starving Artist', featured a pair of kids with broad Yorkshire accents ("Th'all never be a starvin' artist, this lad, will tha?"), depicting a hitherto unimagined frozen-burger-consuming

world north of Watford.

But he was increasingly unhappy with the quality of the ads being made from his writing. He asked if he could set up a test studio in CDP's basement and try out some new stuff.

"The empty, cavernous space was as big as a car park," he later wrote. "It became our own film studio. It was suggested that, as I had written the scripts, I should be the one who said, 'Action!' and, 'Cut.' Any fool could do that. From that moment on, I was hooked."

Parker the writer had become Parker the director and his test work, the 'basement films' as they became known at CDP, became increasingly ambitious and finally disruptive to an agency that was hardly unaccustomed to chaos. The crunch came when management came back from lunch to find the entire staff downstairs sporting tuxedos and ballgowns, shooting an epic ballroom scene. They suggested that Parker found his own production company. CDP would seed-fund it and bung work his way.

Meanwhile, Puttnam, the account director who had shepherded many of Parker's campaigns to their triumphant success, had his



Far right: Ridley Scott behind the lens. Right, top to bottom: Leonard Rossiter and Joan Collins in Parker's much-loved series of Cinzano ads; Fighter jet? Surely not! Tony Scott's ad for Saab; Clever wordplay in an early Parker print ad for Pretty Polly.



eye on bigger fish. "The British film industry was crap," he told *The Telegraph* in 2017. "The stuff they were producing was shit and I knew it. But then I saw *The Graduate* and I thought to myself, 'I could do that.' There was nothing in that film that required a budget. It was a makeable film. I knew the talents who I believed could write a film like that."

And so there was that lunch. And then there was Parker's feature debut, *Bugsy Malone*, in 1976, a pastiche gangster movie that was as far away from the dreary Brit-flicks of the era as could be. It had an irrepressible sense of fun, and in its twist — all the main characters were played by kids — an ad-man's keen sense for the Unique Selling Point.

It was a hit. And as Parker was borne shoulder-high from a triumphant Cannes screening, a Paramount executive named David V. Picker turned to Puttnam. This guy really knew how to shoot, he said. Did David know of any other ad-men who were as good? ➤



The last of the big suspenders.



Ladies, you've seen the last of big ugly suspenders. For a very reasonable 8/11 you can buy Pretty Polly's unique new Hold-Up stockings. Hold-Ups have grip tops that gently hug the leg, so the stockings stay up by themselves. Without suspenders. And there's no suspender like no suspender.



pp
pretty polly



David did. A guy with an incredible eye who ran a production shop just along the street from CDP. Name of Ridley Scott.

Ridley Scott had been watching Parker's cinematic ascent with mounting dismay. "When Al got *Bugsy Malone* I didn't sleep for a week," he told the BBC. "I literally got insomnia."

The two were both friends and rivals. "Between Ridley's company and ourselves we scooped up most of the good scripts," said Parker. "If a script opened with, 'We see a beautiful girl running in slow-motion along a golden Caribbean beach,' Ridley would get that. If a script read, 'We see two overweight ladies talking at a lunch counter in Shepherd's Bush,' I would get that."

Scott had arrived in advertising via the BBC, where he'd worked as a set designer and then director while shooting ads on the side. When that proved to be more lucrative than the day job he jumped ship, founding Ridley Scott Associates in the mid-'60s, just as the advertising boom was roaring into life. RSA was an innovation — it pretty much invented the idea of the dedicated commercials director. No longer would ads be made by telly directors slumming it, or film hacks who couldn't get work. They would be fashioned by mini-auteurs using the most cutting-edge techniques.

The first call for talent he put in was to his brother, Tony, a fellow art-school graduate who was still nursing ambitions to be a fine artist. "Ridley said, 'Come and make commercials with me and pay Dad back for eight years at art school,'" Tony remembered. It didn't hurt that his brother suggested that at the end of the year he'd have enough cash to buy a Ferrari.

When clients expressed qualms about getting the junior partner, Ridley secretly promised them that if Tony screwed it up, he'd reshoot the whole thing for free himself. He never needed to. Tony was a natural. His ads were polished, gleaming, all hard edges and pumping sound. A spot for Saab ('Nothing On Earth Compares') featured the car framed against a looming Saab 37 Viggen fighter jet. Shades of things to come.

"I cornered the market in sexy, rock 'n' roll stuff," he told writer Sam Delaney in 2006. "From the start, I had a blast. I had a run of ten years straight making commercials, during which I got the chance to fuck my way around the world. I couldn't believe it."

Hugh Hudson, an old Etonian with a taste



for the epic that he would later indulge with the disastrous *Revolution* (1985), was another among the new RSA intake. His cinema spot for Benson & Hedges, 'Iguana' — a surrealist epic shot in the Arizona desert involving geckos, rattlesnakes and a helicopter transporting a giant pack of fags *à la* Fellini — was a debacle to shoot, and at over £100,000 the most expensive commercial ever made. The execs at CDP pondered whether he'd gone mad. Stunned cinemagoers, meanwhile, put down their Kia-Ora and actually applauded. For British Airways' 'Face', he marshalled hundreds of extras who slowly formed into a face and then the airline's trademark globe.

With the huge success of RSA, commercials auteurs began to emerge elsewhere. At Jennie & Co over on Beak St, Adrian Lyne had started out as an inept account exec. "I kept all this foreign currency in my drawer and whenever the door opened it used to fly all over the place," he told the advertising podcast *Stuff From The Loft*.

Perhaps to protect the company's finances, he was rapidly promoted, despite never having been behind a camera in his life. But once he called, "Action!" he revealed himself to be a master of propulsive energy, even if he did occasionally refuse to put a product shot in his masterpieces.

Wild, impulsive and undoubtedly possessed by genius, Lyne was temperamentally very different to the other new commercial auteurs. If Ridley did 'sumptuous' and Alan did 'story', Adrian was the high priest of 'cool and sexy'. His commercial for Brutus Jeans ('Jeans On') is a symphony of denim-clad derrières, enthusiastic crash-zooms and precision cuts.





Clockwise from top left: Ad-men nurturer David Puttnam clutches his Oscar for *Chariots Of Fire* (1981); Hugh Hudson's *Greystoke, The Legend Of Tarzan, Lord Of The Apes* (1984); Tony Scott's *Crimson Tide* (1995); Tony on set of 1986's *Top Gun* with Tom Cruise.



Above: Adrian Lyne brings all the sass and sex of his TV commercials to the big screen, here in 1986's *9½ Weeks*.

Left: Lyne with Michael Douglas and Glenn Close while making pop-cultural touchstone *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

But it got fucking killed. It took me three more years to get another movie after it."

By the mid-1980s, the British ad-men's invasion of Hollywood was all but complete. Tony Scott had overcome the disappointment of *The Hunger* to deliver

Top Gun in 1986, a hymn to the aesthetics of advertising. Ridley Scott had changed the way we imagined the future in his (appropriately advertising-drenched) *Blade Runner* in 1982. Adrian Lyne applied his peerless commercial gloss to *9½ Weeks* (1986) and *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and Alan Parker delivered *Angel Heart* (1987). What all these movies shared was an incomparable visual style, and a dedication to showing the audience a good time, a Hollywood virtue that had been all but forgotten amid the previous decade's angsty, anxious cinema.

Not everybody was happy with the way things had turned out. For David Puttnam, it represented a kind of betrayal. When he had started out, had looked at *The Graduate* and thought he could make films like that, he hadn't imagined that the generation of directors whose careers he had in many cases nurtured would decamp to LA and make movies featuring pumping rock soundtracks, jets and bunny-boilers. "I got slaughtered," Tony Scott remembered. "*Top Gun* represented everything bad that had ever been done in cinema. David Puttnam said that. He was meant to be my buddy and the fucker sank me!"

But not only had they defined Hollywood in the 1980s, they had forged a path from commercials to the big screen that future generations of directors would now regularly tread. Jonathan Glazer, Michael Mann, David Fincher, Michael Bay, Sofia Coppola and Spike Jonze all cut their teeth on commercials. For good or ill, Hollywood had bought what this scrappy band of British ad-men were selling, wholesale.

Then again, everybody always did. 🍷

GO FIGURE

THE AD-LAND ALL-STARS' VITAL STATS



2,000

Number of commercials made by Ridley Scott before he made his feature debut with *The Duellists*

10,000

Number of children Alan Parker saw during casting for *Bugsy Malone*



4

Iguanas that died (due to cold weather) during the filming of Hugh Hudson's Benson & Hedges ad

28

Percentage of adults who voted for Hovis' 'Boy On A Bike' as the best advert from the 1970s in a 2018 *Marketing Week* poll, securing it the number-one spot



1

Number of times Ridley Scott's ad for Apple Macintosh ran on US TV (during the 1984 Super Bowl)

20,000,000

Copies of the soundtrack to Adrian Lyne's *Flashdance* sold worldwide

final cut



A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

MAY 2024 | EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT

Ticket to write

PAUL KING AND SIMON FARNABY ON THEIR LONG WRITING PARTNERSHIP, AND NEW TEAM-UP *WONKA* WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

AS YOU MIGHT expect of the men who co-wrote *Wonka*, Paul King and Simon Farnaby have spent the morning in thrall to a Warner Bros. prequel about an eccentric young orphan who uses his incredible talents to galvanise an entire city. "We've been watching *Batman Begins*," confesses King, sitting next to Farnaby in his London office. "We didn't see it before [making *Wonka*]," jokes Farnaby. "Or we'd have had loads of gruff-talking BS."

Hardly. *Wonka*, the glorious confection starring Timothée Chalamet as Roald Dahl's kooky chocolatier, is as far removed as you can get from the Dark Knight, and shows that King (who also directs, of course) and Farnaby are more than capable of recreating the magic they conjured up on the beloved *Paddington 2* back in 2017; their take on Willy Wonka ploughs a similar warm-and-fuzzy storybook furrow, but connected with audiences worldwide in a way even a kind and polite bear couldn't, becoming the big hit of the festive season and putting a whole ton of silver sovereigns in their pock-a-lates. Now, as it hits shiny discs and streaming, *Empire* sits down with King and Farnaby, who've worked together previously on the likes of *The Mighty Boosh* and *Bunny And The Bull*, to talk about how their writing partnership has evolved and endured.

I don't know if you're keeping track, but as we talk, *Wonka* is at \$553 million worldwide, and will crack the \$200 million mark in the States this weekend. That must be beyond your wildest dreams in many ways.

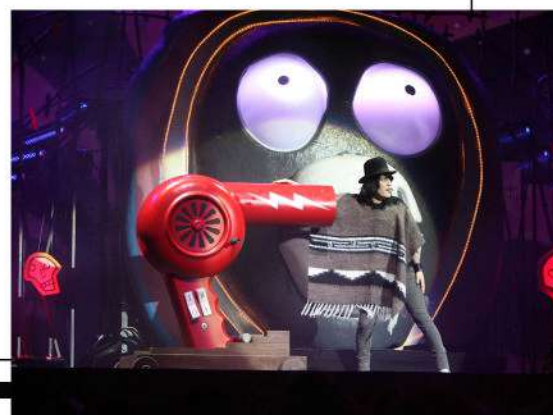
Paul King: It's lovely. But I mean, my dreams are enormous.

Simon Farnaby: We have really wild dreams.

King: My dreams top out at about \$558 million. So it's not beyond my wildest dreams.

Farnaby: I'm sure some filmmakers don't look at box office, but we do. It's just politeness, isn't it? It's really gratifying that people go and spend their money.

King: It's quite odd making films because you don't get a huge amount of connection with the audience. My daughter's been very enthusiastic about this, so I've actually seen it three times in the cinema over the Christmas break, which was a complete joy. And people sent me pictures of posters in other countries, and it brings it home what an extraordinarily huge thing that is. Those sort of slightly meaningless numbers begin to feel a bit more like real people actually seeing the film you spent a lot of effort on, and it's really lovely when you hear people laughing or sniffing into their hankies.





Clockwise from main: Star Timothée Chalamet with director Paul King on the set of *Wonka*; You've never had chocolate like this!; Noel Fielding in the *Mighty Boosh* 2008 stage show, directed by King; Edward Hogg and Simon Farnaby in *Bunny And The Bull* (2009).

Farnaby: Being a hit in America was pretty great. *Paddington 2* didn't really do much there, although it's well loved.

On those trips to the cinema, what are the moments when you can really feel it connect?

King: The ending works very nicely. I love the songs. I never get bored of the songs. But from when the villains have been dispatched, through to 'Pure Imagination' at the end, I'm very proud of that.

Farnaby: I snuck in — well, I did pay actually — in Hampstead, even though the manager there said, "Just come in." I said, "No, here's my £18.50. Just give me the receipt so I can claim it back."

King: If that's not a work expense, what is?

Farnaby: And in that middle section, around 'You've Never Had Chocolate Like This', there was a round of applause at the end. It wasn't a massive standing ovation, but it was



completely spontaneous. I did not join in.
King: You started it off. “Oh, I think that’s worth a round of applause!”

Farnaby: “That was pretty well done!”

King: “I didn’t think the directing was that much, but the writing was terrific there!”

The ending was very different at one point, wasn’t it? Having read the novelisation, I know that there were various tweaks to the story.

King: I really liked that novelisation [by Sibéal Pounder]. It’s very tough for them because the film did evolve a lot during the edit. It’s a nice record of what the film very much almost was in places. I always rather liked the [end] scene with Noodle (*Calah Lane*) seeing the Oompa Loompa, as a kind of epilogue. But it just felt like we’d finished her story at the library. These are the things you learn in the edit. We had a last shot where the Oompa Loompa flew over the town square and you saw the factory, and it was slightly like, “Where’s that come from?” So it’s nice that there’s a version of the story out there where that is the ending.

This writing partnership of yours, did it change particularly in the crucible of this huge movie?

Farnaby: Was it different than *I Am Thicker Than Water*? We did a one-man show loosely based around my grandfather’s addiction to horse racing, called *I Am Thicker Than Water*,

and it was me playing all the parts and me and Paul wrote it together and Paul directed it. And we toured...

King: Five venues? Six venues? To profound indifference.

Farnaby: This was around 2003. It was started at Battersea Arts Centre. That’s how our creative partnership started. It’s much the same now in that we make each other laugh, and we have a feeling for emotion and a feel for story. Obviously it changes when you’ve got \$125 million to play with.

King: But we’re looking for the same things in a film we want to make or a story we want to tell. That one-man show was based around your family. You find things that speak to us personally, but that you also hope might have a resonance with an audience. Otherwise, you just do Battersea Arts Centre to your friends and family. But I think this is the same process. I didn’t feel it was very different to the *Paddingtons*.

Farnaby: Thinking about it now, do you remember we had a character in *I Am Thicker Than Water* who was sort of my dad figure? We made this character based on Gilbert & George, and we loved this voice which went like this: “Don’t be ridiculous, you absolutely foolish little man.” A little bit like the Oompa Loompa. We find voices and things that sort of recur, even though I’ve only just got that connection. I suppose we have a little bit more confidence now.

So you met before you worked on *The Mighty Boosh*?

Farnaby: [To King] You went to direct *The Mighty Boosh* while I went on tour.

So how did you first meet?

King: The BBC did a sitcom competition, which they would then do rehearsal readings of. I had done *Garth Marenghi* in Edinburgh and you were doing some acting, and we were allowed to do a rehearsed reading, which I directed and you were in, of a show called *The Bunk Bed Boys*. I think it won the sitcom competition, but when it came to the pilot being made, I was certainly fired.

Farnaby: I was fired also. We were both replaced.

King: By actual professionals.

So were you both drawn to each other?

King: Well, I hadn’t really done any writing. I’d written in a group, but I’d never sat down at the keyboard and written something on my own. There was an awkward moment where I sort of asked Simon out. Simon was writing with someone else at the time, and I can remember going, “So anyway, if you’d, you know, like to get together and maybe try and write something, it could be, you know, kind of fun.” It was like a scene from *Friends*.

Farnaby: We both liked the theatre. We liked the same slightly experimental theatre things.

King: It’s a lovely trip down Memory Lane.

Left: King laughs with Olivia Colman — as the deliciously named Mrs Scrubbitt — while making *Wonka*.



"I can do funny things. Then Paul puts a shape on it."

SIMON FARNABY

Farnaby: I remember feeling, very specifically, that I was in good hands with Paul because I knew I could do funny things, but I didn't quite know what they amounted to. A bit like this conversation. Paul would always be able to put a shape on it or an emotional spine to it or make it make sense thematically, give it the rounded edges that my scattergun approach maybe couldn't on its own.

King: I think that's probably still the relationship.

When you're in the room now, as writers, how does that work?

King: Well, we watch a lot of Batman.

Farnaby: Paul doesn't let me type.

King: He's borderline illiterate, which I have no problem with spiritually. But my kind of meticulous, organisational thing can't quite tolerate a semicolon being used where it should be a colon, or a comma, or a full stop. So I have to drive the keyboard. I do more pacing.

Farnaby: We have our roles, but then you stray into each other's territory. Paul can say incredibly funny things that really make me laugh, and occasionally I accidentally come up with some wonderful thematic fit.

King: I'm always amazed when I see some of the films Simon writes on his own or with other people. They're really well-spelled and really well-structured. I'm like, "Hang on! You don't need me! You've been carrying me discreetly all these years."

Simon, you're not credited as a writer on *Paddington*, but were you around?

Farnaby: Paul would get me in now and again to look at some stuff.

King: I did write *Paddington*, but with a huge amount of help. A lot of it was from Rosie Alison and David Heyman, and a friend of mine called Samantha Ellis was heavily involved as a script editor. Simon came in later, towards the end.

Farnaby: I did some rehearsals. We did workshop things. I was around, but certainly that was Paul's thing. And then *Paddington 2*, Paul went, "Should we do it from scratch?"

King: Because we couldn't really get anywhere with our writing. That was the reality. We wrote that small play and some scripts that didn't go anywhere, and you were acting a lot, and

Left, top to bottom: Not your average confectioner; Wonka with young sidekick Noodle (Calah Lane); Who knew Oompa Loompas look like Hugh Grant?; King and Farnaby with *Paddington*; Grant, again, in 2017's *Paddington 2*.

Horrible Histories was very successful for you. I got the *Mighty Boosh* job, and then finally on *Bunny And The Bull*, we came back together. But that was more me writing, you acting. But it was lovely on *Paddington 2* to be able to go, "It's us."

With *Wonka*, you knew from the off that it was going to be a musical. Did that change your approach?

King: That was a new departure. And your set-pieces get to be songs, in a way that *Paddington* had those slapstick set-pieces. We wrote dummy lyrics for the first draft of the script, because we didn't have a songwriter, because it wasn't greenlit and songwriters are expensive. Once the studio responded warmly to the script, we landed on Neil [Hannon] very happily. Sometimes he would take what we did — "You've Never Had Chocolate..." was pretty close, or bits of it. And then other times he would entirely go off in his own direction. I think 'Sweet Tooth' was pretty much him.

Farnaby: I thought that would be everyone's favourite song, but they'll tend to pick out 'Never Had Chocolate...', or...

King: 'Pure Imagination'.

Farnaby: But that's nothing to do with us.

What's next for you both?

Farnaby: I think *The Magic Faraway Tree* (based on the Enid Blyton book series) is filming this summer. That's something to look forward to.

That's something you're doing on your own, Simon. I notice you don't bring Paul in on your projects.

King: Well, it's certainly an awkward question you've asked.

Farnaby: I feel unless we're writing it together, Paul would not be interested in any way, shape or form. "What are these words? What is this nonsense?"

King: I did a day on *Mindhorn*.

Farnaby: You did. To be fair, we will share things.

King: I think I find it quite difficult to be hands-off. I like *The Magic Faraway Tree*, and haven't read the script. I feel that if I do read it — and I warned Simon about this this morning — the problem is, I'm going to have strong feelings. And you have to be careful what you wish for. If you're filming in 12 weeks, it's not that useful to go, "I don't like this plot at all!"

Farnaby: That will really break my heart.

So next time you speak to us, we may be in separate rooms.

There may be a schism in the partnership.

King: Well, we're sharing an office. We're working on some things, but there's nothing up and running yet.

Farnaby: The partnership remains strong.

Just be careful where you put those semicolons in future.

King: It's fine. I'll just do the typing. It's important to know your strengths.

WONKA IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL



THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Sleeping Beauty

DISNEY'S SLOW-BURN
ANIMATED TREASURE

WORDS BEN TRAVIS

IT'S IRONIC: ON initial release, *Sleeping Beauty* was... well, slept on. Today, Disney's take on the tale of princess Aurora (aka Briar Rose, and never actually referred to as 'Sleeping Beauty' in the film) is more than just a pop-cultural staple — it's held up as among the highest artistic achievements of the Walt Disney Animation Studio. It's clear to see why — it's a breathtaking accomplishment of animation, a moving tapestry rendered in a striking medieval-inspired visual style, a feat of full-on fantasy filmmaking. Every frame of *Sleeping Beauty* is a work of art in and of itself.

But at the time, audiences didn't care for it. Like many of Disney's greatest works, it launched as a colossal flop, resulting in a level of financial failure that — not for the first or last time — nearly bankrupted the studio entirely. Even its critical reception was thorny, crueller than a christening gift from Maleficent. But the scope of its baffling dismissal and eventual reappraisal hews to the inescapable nature of *Sleeping Beauty*: everything about it is big. Its ambition, its budget — even its Super Technirama 70 widescreen presentation, with a dramatic aspect ratio resulting in astonishingly wide frames. That luxuriously vast canvas was so broad, it effectively demanded twice as much work from its creators to fill, often to their chagrin.

The idea to make *Sleeping Beauty* big — a landmark achievement from America's premier animation studio — was there from the start. While much of Disney's early feature output leaned into the bouncy cartoonal qualities of the studio's Silly Symphonies shorts, Walt was adamant that its third princess-centric fairy-tale feature (after *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella*) should shoot for greater heights. "What we want out of this is a moving illustration," he told sequence director Eric Larson when production began. "I don't care how long it takes." As it turned out, it took a very long time. The studio first registered the title 'Sleeping Beauty' with the MPAA in January 1950; the finished film didn't hit cinemas until

Sleeping Beauty's fate is sealed: Princess Aurora (Mary Costa) meets her nemesis Maleficent (Eleanor Audley).



January 1959, following a slew of delays owing to — among other factors — major rewrites, a heart attack (suffered by supervising director Wilfred Jackson, replaced by Larson), and much of the crew being ported over to the creation of Walt's other unwieldy artistic ambition: Disneyland.

Looking at *Sleeping Beauty* now, the length of its gestation is hardly surprising. To call it lavish would be an understatement — owing not just to Walt's demand for a "moving illustration", but the desire to more authentically integrate the visual style of New York artist Eyvind Earle. For years, the studio had been hiring distinctive artists like Mary Blair to contribute to the development of their features. But where *Cinderella* featured mere hints of Blair's playful imagery in the finished film, this time Walt Disney was insistent that *Sleeping Beauty* would more faithfully recreate — as he dubbed it — the "original styling" of Earle's work.

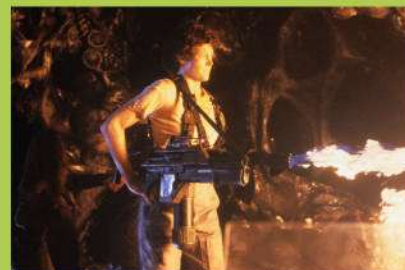
It's Earle's modernist aesthetic that most distinguishes *Sleeping Beauty* even among the upper echelons of Disney masterpieces — with its geometric shapes, vertiginous natural landscapes, and distinctive line-work. The sumptuous scenery is on clearest display in the 'Once Upon A Dream' sequence, the movie's swoon-worthy waltzing

meet-cute, in which Aurora dances through the forest with Prince Phillip (and, more crucially, with a sarcastic owl dressed as Prince Phillip), twirling through a verdant paradise to the Tchaikovsky-inspired score — another element of the movie's high-art leanings.

That astonishingly beautiful visual style accompanies the most assured narrative of Disney's three Walt-era princess movies — taking the Charles Perrault version of the story and playing it straight, without the house-cleaning montages or mouse-centric detours of *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. While Aurora fulfils all the requirements of Disney princessdom (virtuousness; great pipes, here courtesy of Mary Costa; affinity with all animals), she has more spark than those prior characters too, more alive and self-possessed.

But as ever, it's the villain who looms largest — and Maleficent is the greatest of them all, a cackling, yellow-eyed, horn-wreathed sorceress who makes no apologies for her wickedness. In fact, she embraces it, declaring herself "the mistress of all evil"; true to her word, she enters the film by crashing the kingdom's celebration of baby Aurora's arrival, cursing the child to

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1. ALIENS

(OUT 1 APRIL, 4K BR)

One of the greatest sequels ever made, much has been made of how James Cameron broadened Ridley Scott's scope ("This time it's war", indeed), but the first hour, before the mayhem is unleashed, is as tense as Scott's movie. Sigourney Weaver has never been better as Ripley, believe it or not.

2. THE SWIMMER

(OUT 25 MARCH, BR)

Burt Lancaster plays a man who decides to swim home, through neighbourhood pools, and ends up mired in metaphor. Is he depressed? Dying? Both? Whatever you decide, there's no denying the power of Frank Perry's wonderfully surreal drama, that clings to you like the smell of chlorine.

3. ANATOMY OF A FALL

(OUT 18 MARCH, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

Nominated for five Oscars, Justine Triet's courtroom drama also kicked down the Palme d'Or, and justifiably so. Anchored by a stunning performance from Sandra Hüller as a woman who may or may not have killed her husband, it's a complex and compelling character study.

4. PRIMAL FEAR

(OUT 25 MARCH, 4K BR)

A much more conventional, but no less entertaining, courtroom drama comes in the shape of Gregory Hoblit's thriller, which introduced Edward Norton to the world via an astonishing performance as an altar boy who might be hiding a potentially murderous multiple personality.

5. BOTTOMS

(OUT NOW, PRIME VIDEO)

Emma Seligman's raucous and energetic high-school comedy sees two girls (Ayo Edebiri and Rachel Sennott) set up a fight club. Hits harder than you might expect, and thankfully it hits the funny bone hardest of all.

Top to bottom: Princess Aurora becomes the Sleeping Beauty; The fairy Godmothers: Fauna, Merryweather and Flora; The final fiery showdown: Maleficent transforms into a magnificent dragon to battle Prince Phillip (Bill Shirley).



a terrible teenage death before promptly leaving. It's such a commitment to corruption that Disney's later efforts to reframe her actions more empathetically in the live-action *Maleficent* films feel like an insult to her gleeful nastiness. Both Aurora and Maleficent were masterfully animated by Marc Davis; the former inspired by Audrey Hepburn, the latter by rippling flickers of flame.

It's in the final reel that *Sleeping Beauty* cements its legacy — an all-action showdown that sees Prince Phillip tool up to take on Maleficent, summoning "all the powers... of hell!" to transform into a frame-filling, fire-breathing dragon. With its eruptions of lime-green flames, nightmarish visions of the forest swarmed with thickets of thorns, and perilous clifftop last-stand, it's monumental stuff — today, the iconography reads more than a little *Game Of Thrones*.

Which makes it all the harder to fathom that it left viewers in 1959 largely non-plussed. While Disney intended to continue the fairy-tale lineage that birthed the studio with *Snow White* and revived it post-war with *Cinderella*, the overwhelming criticism of *Sleeping Beauty* was that it was too similar, Disney stagnating in overly familiar territory. As a result, its initial \$5.3 million

box-office return on a \$6 million budget — the biggest for a Disney animated feature — was nigh-on ruinous. Its next film, the distinctly swinging-'60s *One Hundred And One Dalmatians*, pioneered far-cheaper Xerox animation techniques to keep costs down; Disney wouldn't return to the princess well until 1989's *The Little Mermaid*.

But it's telling that the documentary feature exploring the '90s Disney renaissance — when princess stories boomed again, to major critical and commercial success — was titled *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. With a few decades' hindsight, *Sleeping Beauty* proved to be the artistic peak the studio aspired to after a largely disastrous '80s — a benchmark of what's possible with enough time, money, and artistic intention. Nobody sleeps on its beauty now.

**SLEEPING BEAUTY IS OUT NOW ON
DVD, BLU-RAY, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+**



Feats of clay

AARDMAN CO-FOUNDER PETER LORD ON THE STUDIO'S GREATEST CHARACTERS

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

SINCE AARDMAN ANIMATIONS, the stop-motion specialists based in Bristol, was formed in 1972, virtually everything it's produced has had Peter Lord's fingerprints on it. Sometimes literally. As an animator, writer, producer, director and executive producer, he has helped shape one of the greatest animation studios on the planet. With *Chicken Run: Dawn Of The Nugget* now on Netflix, we asked him to talk us through some of Aardman's greatest characters.



MOLLY

The emotional centre, and wings, of the studio's *Chicken Run* sequel, Molly (voiced by Bella Ramsey) is the daughter of Rocky and Ginger, the heroes of the first film. Plucky (but, crucially, not plucked) and indefatigable (but, crucially, not in de fat fryer), Lord credits Molly's development to Karey Kirkpatrick, the film's initial writer. "It was his idea to bring a child into the story," says Lord. "He wanted that parent-child dynamic, but we didn't realise how it would open up this whole story. A long time ago, more than six years ago, Molly was a boy, called Nobby, and the parent-child double act was between Rocky and his son."



ROCKY

Aardman kept things terribly British for their World War II-inspired comedy *Chicken Run*, but did import a big star — Mel Gibson — to voice an



all-American rooster (Rocky was later recast and is voiced by Zachary Levi in *Dawn Of The Nugget*). "It was a smart move," admits Lord. "Part of that was with a commercial head on, knowing that would help to sell the movie. I have a distant memory that for a while, Rocky might have been Irish, but the important point was that he was an outsider, and he was a man. I'll credit Karey Kirkpatrick, the writer, because he loves Rocky. When he was writing Rocky he was away."



THE PIRATE CAPTAIN

A deliciously vainglorious chap good at neither swashing nor buckling, the Pirate Captain is at the centre of *The Pirates! In An Adventure With Scientists!*, the Lord-directed gagapalooza that may be Aardman's funniest film. It also gave Hugh Grant a gem of a role. "He wasn't the obvious choice," admits Lord. "It was exciting to work with him. There was one joke about roaring, and Hugh doesn't roar. That is not his thing. But I did ask him to go spare for one take. He was saving his voice, and he wasn't happy, but we did use it in the end."



MORPH

Co-created by Aardman co-founder David Sproxton, Morph is a silent, boundlessly optimistic chap who first debuted on *Take Hart*, a BBC kids' show featuring the talented artist Tony Hart. "The producer asked us to come up with a character to be a comic foil to Tony Hart," explains Lord. "When he was first created, he didn't have a character. He just ran around on the tabletop, wreaking havoc. But the great thing is that he's had the luxury of time to evolve. I'm incredibly attached to him. In fact, I confess I'm even writing something now for him, so we'll see how that goes."



GRANDSANTA

"I love that film," says Lord of *Arthur Christmas*, the 2011 CG animation that, after a slow burn, has become something of a festive perennial. "It was rather badly positioned in the theatrical release, but creatively it's fantastic." Its secret weapon

Left: Peter Lord proudly brandishes Babs at the LFF Gala premiere of *Chicken Run: Dawn Of The Nugget*, in the Royal Festival Hall, London, on 14 October last year.

is Bill Nighy as the mischievous, mordant Grandsanta, a cackling bit of grit amid all the glitter. "It's quite a dark world that he occupies," says Lord. "But he turns out to be incredibly important to the story. He's a terrible role model."



WALLACE AND GROMIT

Lord didn't have a hand in the creation of Aardman's flagship characters, of course. That's all down to Nick Park, the human Oscar-Hoover. But Lord remembers well the moment when a very young Park, who was making *A Grand Day Out* as a student film, showed them some footage. "We saw what Nick was doing with Wallace, and thought, 'Smart boy,'" says Lord. "And then we saw some shots that made us laugh. The memorable one was a line of dialogue with Wallace saying, 'We've forgotten the crackers!' Nick animated it once, and it was fine, but he went back and had a second go using this exaggerated mouth-shape that he has pioneered, and suddenly you laughed." Cracking animation, Nick.



SHAUN THE SHEEP

Introduced to great acclaim in *A Close Shave*, Shaun The Sheep was quickly spun off into his own wildly successful children's show, which then begat two wonderfully daft movies. "I remember some writers came up with a version where he did talk, and lived in a sheep world where sheep would go to a sheep cinema and drive a sheep car," says Lord. "God, while we were writing the first one, there were a couple of times when you would have given your right arm to be able to say one line of dialogue." Instead, the mutton remained mute.

CHICKEN RUN: DAWN OF THE NUGGET IS ON NETFLIX NOW

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

WALTER MOSLEY

THE KITCHEN CO-DIRECTOR KIBWE TAVARES ON HOW THE GREAT NOVELIST TURNED UP THE HEAT



WHEN YOU GET to the Special Thanks section of the credits for *The Kitchen*, the striking, powerful sci-fi that marks the directorial debut of both Daniel Kaluuya and Kibwe Tavares, you're confronted with a ton of names, enough to wage a small war. "There have been quite a few angels on this film," Tavares tells *Empire*. We wanted to make sure that everyone got recognised in some form."

Among those thanked are Nia DaCosta, Jack Thorne, Peter Ramsey, Ludwig Göransson, and Shaka King. But for Tavares, it was important not to forget where his movie began. And *The Kitchen* started in the lab — the Sundance Labs, where it was developed as part of that programme. Tavares tips his hat in the direction of actors Anthony Welsh and Eric Kofi-Abrefa, neither of whom are actually in his movie. "Both those actors were in the original workshop we shot in Daniel's barber shop," he says. "They'd been there from the start, and then Anthony came to the Sundance Labs and developed the project further with us."

The film's start at the Sundance Labs also led to the unexpected presence of Walter Mosley (pictured left), the great American novelist behind the Easy Rawlins series of books. "He was one of our advisors at the Sundance Labs," he says. "There are some big key things that came from our conversations. He started talking about a movement called Move, in Philadelphia in the '80s. They were a group of Rastafarians living in this house, and it was eventually bombed by the government. That's where some of the ideas of the Kitchen being contained in one space came from. And when I went back to the Directors Lab, he was also there and those conversations shaped what the film was." Invaluable help in the kitchen? Let's call him the sous chef. **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE KITCHEN IS ON NETFLIX NOW



The Ranking

Nicole Kidman movies

WE TACKLE THE OSCAR-WINNER'S CV. WHICH OF HER FILMS IS FAR & AWAY THE BEST?



SELMAN HOŞGÖR

OUR CRITICS



CHRIS HEWITT

Still hasn't forgiven Kidman for trying to kill Paddington.



HELEN O'HARA

No laws, no limits, one rule: vote for *Moulin Rouge!*



NICK DE SEMLYEN

Tried watching *Eyes Wide Shut* with his eyes shut.



BECKY DARKE

Worried about what to place first, but is dead calm now.

Chris: So, Nicole Kidman.

Helen: I am delighted to talk about this absolutely batshit-insane filmography.

Chris: And a Batman-shit filmography. Or a shit Batman.

Becky: Oh, come on now.

Chris: It's true. *Batman Forever* is awful.

Nick: You take that back, and apologise to Dr Chase Meridian.

Chris: Greatest character name. Second-worst Batman film. Anyway, what is it about Nicole Kidman that has made her stand out for 35 years?

Nick: Don't forget the AMC commercial, which I have voted for several times.

Chris: It's number one in my ranking.

Helen: For someone who basically looks perfect as a human being, she has an enormous array of different screen presences. I feel she's way more versatile than a nearly six-foot-tall blonde goddess should be.

Chris: She's like the Birds Eye potato waffles of acting.

Helen: She is waffly versatile.

Nick: I'd like to see her do more comedy. Doing a rewatch of some of her stuff was pretty intense. A lot of the films, you need to just stare out of the window for ten minutes afterwards. She's great in *Paddington*, but she's definitely veered towards the heavy stuff. Even *Moulin Rouge!*, which looks like a fun musical, is very heavy.

Helen: Well, she dies, but there's a lot of capering before that.

Chris: She dies a lot. She's also

the Steve Buscemi of actresses.

Helen: She's an incredible comedian. Something like *Being The Ricardos* does play the tragedy side, but it also allows her to do Lucille Ball, which she does really, really impressively.

Becky: *To Die For* and *Paddington* give her this opportunity to be quite playful.

Nick: What's her standout moment in *Paddington*?

Chris: When she tries to seduce Mr Curry, I think. I reviewed it for *Empire* and described her as "Nigel Farage in fuck-me boots". Now there's an image.

Nick: Never say those words in that order again.

Chris: She's got an interesting career trajectory. She's been in big movies, but she's ploughed an indie-movie furrow over the years.

Becky: She plays both sides of the coin, I guess. So she's worked with Lars von Trier and Gus Van Sant and Park Chan-wook, but also Aquaman and Batman. She always plays big emotions, whatever she's in. And I think that plays into indie filmmaking a lot.

Nick: When she's done big blockbusters, it's generally been shared billing with someone else. She's in *The Peacemaker* with George Clooney, which is the most forgettable film. I think she's at her best when the film is quiet and still and slow. I saw *Birth* the other night and there's a shot that's on her face for two minutes, and there's so much going on. You're just hypnotised.

Chris: She's had some great

collaborations in her life. She's worked with Baz Luhrmann twice, on *Australia* and *Moulin Rouge!*

Nick: All I remember about *Australia* is at the press screening, when Hugh Jackman took his shirt off, a woman literally screamed.

Helen: I'm sorry!

Becky: I hate *Moulin Rouge!*

Nick: Oh good, I hate it too!

Becky: I thought I'd give it another chance, but I couldn't get through 25 minutes of it.

Nick: It's like being screamed at by a three-year-old for two hours. That said, she's singing, she's dancing, she's doing good work.

Helen: I put this quite high. Because when I think about Nicole Kidman, this is what comes to mind. And it was such a huge thing for her.

Becky: I find that in a lot of her films, the characters talk

about her beauty.

Helen: Absolutely. I think it's interesting how she's used and kind of undermined her beauty over the years.

Nick: That's a real recurring theme with her. You first meet her in a story and she seems like she's got it all together, and then slowly you see under the surface there's a lot more going on, spinning out of control.

Chris: It's there quite early in *To Die For*, which is a great film. **Nick:** It's a great performance, and really prescient, when you look at Instagram culture now. **Chris:** And it's a comedy, and an early Nicole Kidman death. So she's starting as she means to go on.

Nick: She doesn't die in *Dead Calm*. I love *Dead Calm*. It's her most fun film. Sorry, *Batman Forever*.

Becky: It really stands up as well. It's as good as I remember,





if not better. And she's such a baby in it, but you can see that star potential.

Chris: There's inner grit. And she not only had to hold her own against Billy Zane's psycho, but Billy Zane's performance. You can see why Hollywood was so beguiled by her.

Helen: I would suggest, though, that another fun Nicole Kidman film exists, and it's *Practical Magic*. It's probably the film of hers with the biggest and most passionate fanbase.

Chris: What do they call themselves — Practical Magicians?

Helen: They call themselves, I believe, 'women'.

Chris: Then there's also my beloved *Paddington*, aka "The Attempted Killing Of A Sacred Bear". So much fun. Now, *The Northman* isn't fun, but has perhaps the most fucked-up scene in the Kidman

filmography — and that is a wide-open category — when she's trying to fuck Alexander Skarsgård, her own son. She's so evil in that, it's extraordinary.

Nick: There's a fearlessness to her. She goes to places very few other actors do.

Chris: She won an Oscar for playing Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*. Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Not Nicole Kidman, that's for sure. This is maybe a bit harsh, but the film's not that great. Is this the film you would have given her the Oscar for?

Helen: No. But she was wearing a prosthetic nose, so plus 100 points. And I think it was a matter of them feeling they should maybe have given it to her for *Moulin Rouge!*

Nick: I would have gone for *Destroyer*, another film where she transforms herself. She's good in *The Hours*, but she's not actually in it that much.

Chris: *Destroyer* is a tour de force.

Becky: It's an incredible film. You can almost feel her pain radiating out of the screen.

Chris: What about her working relationship with Tom Cruise? They made three films together: *Days Of Thunder*, *Far & Away* — the worst film they made together — and *Eyes Wide Shut*. It's 25 years on now from that. It got a bit of a kicking at the time. Should it be reassessed?

Becky: It's such a fascinating piece of work, and way more entertaining than I remembered it being.

Helen: I think people didn't expect it to be slyly funny and an undermining of the Cruise persona in particular, and didn't

know what to make of it. It's a bizarre psychedelic adventure through stuff that a man is completely ill-equipped to deal with. She's great in it, but it's very much a supporting role.

Becky: *Far & Away* was such a favourite of mine as a kid. I used to watch it a lot and I'm slightly embarrassed about that.

Chris: Hollywood keeps telling us they love the Irish, then they go and give us that.

Nick: *Dogville* is my number one Nicole Kidman film. It's a really unusual film, but she's absolutely astonishing. I saw somebody describing her as acting like it's a sport in that. An extreme sport.

Helen: They talk about Meryl Streep wanting to "win the scene". I think Nicole Kidman does the same thing. She really goes in to make an impact.

Chris: She does love getting into period costume. Which brings us to *Stoker*. Another of the many collaborations in her career with a visionary auteur: Wentworth Miller. I love *Stoker*. Such a dark, twisted, funny film.

Nick: I love this film. It needs to be talked about more, because it's a masterpiece and not enough people have seen it.

It's not really her film, though.

Chris: And there's another period film we haven't talked about: *The Others*.

Nick: Again, acting as an extreme sport. I have a limited tolerance for haunted-house movies, but this one is great.

Becky: As a horror fanatic, one of the things that elevates a horror is that it has to scare the shit out of me. And *The Others* did that. I rewatch it relatively regularly because it's one of my favourite, if not my favourite, ghost film.

Helen: I think a lot of that comes from her desperation to keep things together in a very difficult situation.

Chris: Not to spoil it, but imagine when they sent her the script. "Do I die in the end?" "It's even better than that, Nicole." "I'm in." Anyway, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?

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THE TOP TEN



THE OTHERS
(2001)



DESTROYER
(2018)



PADDINGTON
(2014)



DEAD CALM
(1989)



TO DIE FOR
(1993)



EYES WIDE SHUT
(1999)



DOGVILLE
(2003)



STOKER
(2013)



MOULIN ROUGE!
(2001)



THE KILLING OF
A SACRED DEER
(2017)

How To Give A Stellar Performance

BAFTA-WINNER MIA McKENNA-BRUCE ON HER BREAKOUT ROLE IN HOW TO HAVE SEX WORDS **BETH WEBB**

BREAKOUT ROLES DON'T come much more challenging than that of Tara, the assertive, sparky teen played by Mia McKenna-Bruce in *How To Have Sex*. The directorial debut from Molly Manning Walker is at once a coming-of-age movie about a 16-year-old seeking escape and ecstasy on a cheap party holiday, and a bracing study of sex and consent that forces audiences to reckon with big problems caused by society's treatment of young women. The film scooped up the Un Certain Regard award following its world premiere at Cannes, and recently McKenna-Bruce won the EE Rising Star BAFTA, in no small part due to her performance. Speaking with *Empire*, she breaks down how she approached a character that has come to mean so much to her.

TEEN MENTALITY

To prepare for the role, McKenna-Bruce, now in her mid-twenties, looked to her younger sisters. "They are my go-to when it comes to checking in and seeing what's going on in the mind of that kind of age," she says of the 16- and 21-year-old siblings, who were also a major motivation behind her taking on such a challenging film in the first place. Then, during rehearsals, McKenna-Bruce and her co-stars were asked to bring in photos of themselves at the age of their characters. She was fascinated by what she saw: "Even little things like my hair was bleached blonde, or I had painted on fake freckles really badly; seeing that shift and figuring out when those changes happened were really helpful."

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

How To Have Sex was filmed in the party district of Malia, Crete. The shoot itself took place off-season, but the sun, sea and thoroughly orchestrated ragers that Tara and her pals attend still acted as a means of time travel for McKenna-Bruce and her co-stars. "I don't know if it was the energy from being there or the energy of us all being together, but we would get together and this hyperness would take over like we were teenagers again," she remembers. While playing

Tara, she came to the realisation that she held a lot of parallels with her character: "Trying to live up to these expectations that people have of you, I think a lot of teenagers have that."

FIELD RESEARCH

Walker and the film's producers staged workshops with teenagers across the UK ahead of shooting. Pages of the script were passed around, some with scenes involving the sexual assault of Tara by a boy she's befriended, Paddy (Samuel Bottomley). "These workshops were a big reason why the film got made," says McKenna-Bruce, referencing the teens' responses to those pages. "A lot of girls in particular were standing up and saying, 'There's nothing wrong with it. She shouldn't be drunk, she should be wearing more clothes,' and trying to place the blame on Tara." Conversations from those meet-ups were brought into the actors' rehearsals and helped to make the characters as accessible as possible.

Even some of Tara's mannerisms were informed by the workshops. While Walker was speaking with one teen about assault, she noticed them playing with the hairband on their wrist for — as McKenna-Bruce describes it — "a bit of release, that's what we'd come to". Her character consequently does the same when she feels anxious, along with picking her nails. This comes into play during a fraught night on the holiday where Tara and Paddy have sex on the beach, although the boundaries of consent during the encounter are blurred. "When she was particularly feeling that nervous energy, her go-to was to get rid of the sand from her nails or clothes," says McKenna-Bruce. "It was like if she was getting rid of the sand, she was getting rid of the [memories]."

THE UNSEEN TARA

The film begins and ends with Tara's holiday, with very little mention of her homelife. Instead, Walker and McKenna-Bruce crafted an intricate backstory for the character to help inform how she behaved onscreen, from her seemingly boundless confidence around strangers to her

Clockwise from right: The morning after the night before: Tara (Mia McKenna-Bruce) is ill at ease in Malia; Holiday-ready; Face to face: Paddy (Samuel Bottomley) and Tara; Skye (Lara Peake), Em (Enva Lewis) and Tara get into the party spirit; McKenna-Bruce on set with writer-director Molly Manning Walker.





“She tries to get rid of sand from her nails, to get rid of memories.”



complicated relationship with her best friend, Skye (Lara Peake). “We figured out that maybe Tara had a big brother, so had experience of being around older people, especially older boys,” McKenna-Bruce explains. “That’s something that Skye was envious of, because Tara could go into these groups and still be herself.”

It was important that the knotty, occasionally toxic dynamic between Tara, Skye, and their third friend Em (Enva Lewis) was determined early on in order to make it feel as lived-in as possible. The actor and director decided that Em and Tara had been childhood friends, with Skye a newer addition with higher social status. “She’s the cool girl at school, and the other two are trying to live up to her,” says McKenna-Bruce.

PULLING THREADS

When Tara’s not ensconced in oversized hoodies and sweater shorts, she’s taking on

the Malibu strip in clubwear: dresses, skirts and tops in bright or neon colours, often borrowed from Skye, and always skin-tight. “When we had the costume fittings, they were intentionally made to be slightly ill-fitting,” McKenna-Bruce remembers, while also describing her constant urge to tug and pull down the uncomfortable clothes. After the beach scene, Tara’s Day-Glo green dress is turned inside out, the clinging sand and disorder of her outfit adding to her distress. “Those bits are important,” the actor explains. “They’re not necessarily details you’d pick on straightaway, but they were really helpful for me when getting into where Tara is.”

The booze-soaked streets of Malibu are Tara’s personal battlefield, with McKenna-Bruce, clad in Lycra armour, steering her through the trauma and triumphs of youth.

HOW TO HAVE SEX IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

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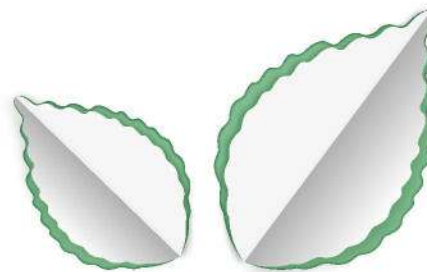
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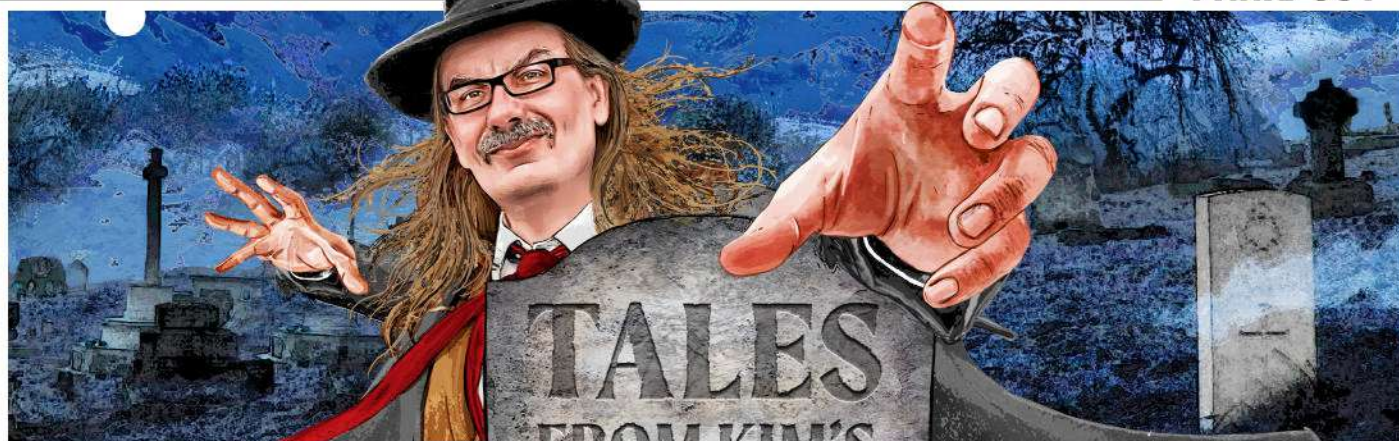
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THIS MONTH AWARDS SEASON

I'M WRITING THIS column towards the end of awards season, when my usual cult-cinema viewing list gets set aside so I can watch a stack of worthy pictures about serious subjects. I thought it might be an interesting exercise to suggest more outré complementary programming for this year's crop of major motion pictures. In many cases, I'm more likely to go with the cultier version again than revisit the Oscar-BAFTA-GG-Critics' Circle picks.

Oppenheimer — quite a lot of the plot of *Oppenheimer* follows *The Beginning Or The End* (1947), which was essentially a biopic of the Bomb, with egghead Oppie (Hume Cronyn) and gruff General Groves (Brian Donlevy) as head cheerleaders. If you thought Christopher Nolan's film a mite self-important, note that 20th Century Fox buried a print of *The Beginning Or The End* in a time capsule to be opened in the 25th century as "an enduring record of our civilisation".

Barbie — obviously, once you've seen *Barbie* you need to check out Kim Cattrall in *Mannequin* (1987) and Kristy Swanson in *Mannequin On The Move* (1991). I've not seen either in 30 years but they can't be as terrible as I remember. The mannequins come to life could easily be billed as '80s Hair Barbies.

The Holdovers — there's a fashion for redoing heartwarming movies as slasher films (cf. *Happy Death Day*), but *The Holdovers* inverts the process by taking the premise of last year's *The Sacrifice Game* — a few sad pupils having to

spend the holiday at boarding school in 1971 — and takes out the murdering devil-cult angle.

Maestro — need to see a megalomaniac classical musician in weird age make-up? You could go with Michael York in *Phantom Of Death* (1988) — he's a pianist who suffers from a) rapid ageing syndrome and b) homicidal mania. It has the edge over the Netflix film because Donald Pleasence is in it and Bradley Cooper isn't.

The End We Start From — the weirdest thing about the apocalyptic Jodie Comer showcase is how much it plays like a remake of Cornel Wilde's eco-breakdown nightmare *No Blade Of Grass* (1970), which at least has rampaging Hells Angels and many shoot-outs as its survivalists trek across a blighted Britain to a promised stronghold.

Poor Things — to be fair, if *Poor Things* were much, much cheaper, made in 1987 and starred Traci Lords, I'd absolutely cover it in this column. Since it isn't, wasn't and doesn't, its *Bride Of Frankenstein* should lead you to bizarre variants — I recommend *Frankenhooker* and *Patchwork*, which have gruesome fun with the several-girls-sewn-together premise.

Saltburn — Emerald Fennell lifts the title font from Hammer's *Dracula*, so you know she'd much rather make a monster movie than a prestige special. Everyone has noted the *Talented Mr. Ripley* similarities, but for even weirder riffs on outsiders spreading chaos in stately homes, look at *Blue Blood* (1974), with Oliver Reed as a glowering devil butler undermining posh prat Derek Jacobi, or *Something For Everyone* (1970), with Michael York (him again) as a cook servicing and enslaving a castle-load of European aristocrats.



Top: Before *Oppenheimer*, there was 1947's *The Beginning Or The End*. Above: Kim Cattrall in *Mannequin* (1987).

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

BIRTH/REBIRTH (DIGITAL)

Writer-director Laura Moss' impactful first feature is an up-to-the-minute *Frankenstein* reimagining. Detached neuroatypical scientist and emotionally involved grieving mother keep a resurrected child alive through increasingly gruesome, horrific means. A tough, rewarding watch.

LORD OF MISRULE (DIGITAL)

In William Brent Bell's new film, vicar Tuppence Middleton fears her daughter has been abducted during Harvest Festival as a sacrifice to the dreaded Gallowgog and all her neighbours are in on it. It works hard to avoid the tropes of too much folk horror in favour of proper rural nastiness.

ON THE LINE (DIGITAL)

Writer-director Oliver Pearn's thriller gets a lot out of one set (a telephone exchange on Alderney in 1964) and performer (Victoria Lucie). A switchboard operator tries to help a desperate caller she thinks has been kidnapped — but as more calls come in, the mystery gets more complicated.

THE PORTRAIT (DIGITAL)

Natalia Cordova-Buckley brings brain-damaged husband Ryan Kwanten to his family estate, hoping to cure his amnesia — but both fall under the supernatural influence of a portrait in the attic. Simon Ross' Gothic ghost story has unsettling moments — but its basic plot feels stretched at feature length.

THE SEEDING (DIGITAL)

Unwary eclipse-watcher Scott Haze is lured into a deep crevasse in the Utah desert inhabited by glum, unforthcoming Kate Lyn Sheil. But both seem to be playthings of a pack of *Hills Have Eyes*-ish feral children. Barnaby Clay pulls off a disturbing art-film riff on back-of-beyond horror.

The making of a punk nightmare

DIRECTOR JEREMY SAULNIER
ON HOW HE TURNED GREEN
ROOM INTO A TUNED-UP
TENSION MACHINE

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

JEREMY SAULNIER RECENTLY showed *Green Room* to his 16-year-old daughter. “She’s a horror nerd, like her father,” he laughs. “She goes to an art school in LA, and the funny thing is, they teach genre lighting, and *Green Room* is on the curriculum.” So, did she like her old man’s film? “I think she dug it,” says Saulnier. “Although she did try to watch it in two sittings. I was like, ‘No. This is a ride, my friend. You get on, you cannot get off.’”

Say that again. *Green Room*, which Saulnier wrote and directed, is as relentless and gripping as it was when it first came out in 2016. It is a boot on the throat, a Stanley knife to the arm, a shotgun-blast to the face. Which is what Saulnier was going for when he first came up with the film’s central notion: it would be a siege movie in which a punk band, the Ain’t Rights, wind up taking refuge in the green room of a neo-Nazi bar in a Southern backwater after they witness a murder and become expendable as a result. Saulnier started writing it after the success of his breakout film, *Blue Ruin*, in 2013. “I was getting thrown some scripts that I didn’t understand completely,” he tells *Empire* from an edit suite, where he’s finishing his fifth movie, *Rebel Ridge*. “I’d had this idea floating around, based on my youth. We were into punk rock and going to hardcore shows. I remember being at a metal show in Virginia, out in the sticks, with some tough people, and it was a little scary. And I realised, if shit went down, we would be in really deep trouble. That stuck with me.”

Saulnier started writing *Green Room* as both a technical exercise, in how to generate and sustain tension, and an exorcism, getting rid of that idea. He didn’t necessarily intend to make it his follow-up, but somewhere along the way he lured himself in. “I’m not writing for executives, I’m not writing for anyone but the audience and myself,” he recalls of his attitude. “And I put myself in the audience’s place. I allowed the script to create its own tension, because I wasn’t over-navigating it. I was there, I was scared, I was living it.”



Much of the tension in *Green Room* comes from a feeling that anything can happen to any character at any time, and that nobody is safe from Saulnier’s unwavering axe. Or, in most cases, attack dog. Over the course of 90-odd gruelling, gore-flecked minutes, likeable people make sudden life-or-death choices that mostly wind up in death. “The story itself had a trajectory,” he says. “The characters who I loved, when they made a mistake in this high-stakes situation, I did not magically write them out of it. They died. When you see the people that are supposed to make it, it’s a legitimate surprise because I’m surprised as the writer. From that moment forth, when shit starts to go down, you realise this movie has no mercy. That carries through to the very end.”

To play his heroes, Saulnier cast a bunch of young up-and-coming actors who have since upped and come: Callum Turner, Alia Shawkat (in a role originally written for a guy), Joe Cole and Imogen Poots. That three out of four of them were Brits (not to mention the man playing his lead villain was unintentional. “I just wanted authenticity,” he says. “It was easy to cast this movie because it’s a movie that has a certain level of violence, and the energy was

“You realise this movie has no mercy, to the very end.”

very attractive for young people.”

For the lead role of Pat, the Ain’t Rights’ guitarist, who becomes the only member of the band to make it through to the end (albeit much changed), Saulnier cast Anton Yelchin. Tragically, Yelchin died in an accident in June 2016, just a couple of months after *Green Room* came out, and his death still clearly impacts Saulnier to this day. “It’s tough,” says the director, clearly emotional. “I don’t know what they used for my interview for the 4K release, but man, it was just snot and tears. Even now...” He trails off, gathers his thoughts. “He’s the only

Alamy



one who actually came after me for the part. And it was very clear that he was Pat. He was actually legit punk rock, and had all the cred. He had chops, and that's what I needed, as the whole wave of the movie would be on his shoulder."

A shoulder that is very nearly lopped off in the film's pivotal sequence, where Pat has a conversation with Darcy, the leader of the neo-Nazi skinheads, in which he is persuaded to part with the group's gun in exchange for safety, only to have his arm hacked to ribbons. Saulnier came to refer to the scene as "the infamous scene 58", "because it was ten pages of talk, and it's where the film turns, and it's out of my hands. It's in the performers' hands. And we have to compel the audience to sit and wait and ratchet this thing up, without seeing much." He's not kidding. Because, even though Darcy is on the other side of a locked door, Saulnier keeps his camera firmly fixed on Pat throughout the scene. All we can hear of Darcy is his soft Southern burr. That's already a bold directorial choice, but even more so when you factor in that Darcy is played by Patrick Stewart, who jumped at the chance to play against type as an utterly despicable villain.

"It was written that way," says Saulnier. "But I did burn a camera on Patrick. I said, 'This can't be ADR, this is live theatre. You're on the other side of the door, and this is scary as fuck.' It was important that Patrick feel the heat of the camera. But it's like *Jaws*: the less you see, the better." It clearly worked, not just for the film, but for the performers. "Anton was miked with a lavalier mic, the ones that clip onto your chest," says Saulnier. "And there were times that Anton's heart-rate was so high, you could hear it pounding." Sounds very much like a typical audience-member watching *Green Room*. Directors' daughters might be exempt.

GREEN ROOM IS OUT ON 18 MARCH ON 4K BLU-RAY



Above: Pat (Anton Yelchin) with bandmate Amber (Imogen Poots). **Right, top to bottom:** Neo-Nazi bar owner Darcy (Patrick Stewart) with Gabe (Macon Blair); The Ain't Rights in action; Neo-Nazis Daniel (Mark Webber) and Jonathan (Samuel Summer). **Left, top to bottom:** Tiger (Callum Turner), Pat, Reece (Joe Cole) and Sam (Alia Shawkat) are threatened; Writer-director Jeremy Saulnier on set.



Time Capsule

Ray Winstone



THE ORIGINAL SEXY BEAST ON THE IMAGES OF HIS CAREER

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

"I'M THE DADDY NOW!" yelled Ray Winstone in his blistering breakthrough role as Carlin in Alan Clarke's 1979 borstal drama *Scum*. No arguments there. Although it took the East London-born actor a decade or so to properly fulfil that promise, he's since worked with Hollywood A-listers such as Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese and Robert Zemeckis, while also delivering a raft of incredible turns in homegrown fare. Here, *Empire* takes him on a trip down Memory Lane...

SPEEDO KING SEXY BEAST 2000

"That's Raymondo. I'm thinking about the prep for the job. (Winstone plays Gary 'Gal' Dove, a retired criminal who has relocated to Spain to start a new life with wife DeeDee, played by Amanda Redman.) I was told to go on the beach when we got there and get a suntan, and eat and drink as much as I wanted. That was my prep. But it still ain't too bad! It's alright! That is a geezer. A geezer ain't got an eight-pack. And that's what it's about. 'Sexy beast'. The beast is the money, the beast is the blag, the beast is Don, the beast is the rabbit, and the beast is Teddy Bass. There's your sexy beast."



NO DISTRESS DAMSEL 2024

"That's the great Angela Bassett, who plays my wife (Lady Bayford). Terrific woman, a great actress. And that's us pulling into the kingdom [in which Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's upcoming fantasy film is set] for the first time, on a boat. And this thing comes out of the mist and kind of catches us off guard a little bit. This was [filmed on] an actual set, and you had green screen all round you. It's done so differently today than when I first started out."



KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESY INDIANA JONES AND THE KINGDOM OF THE CRYSTAL SKULL 2008

"Jonesy! He was just a wrong 'un, Mac, but I said that if he was a cowardly wrong 'un and he batted for whoever was winning at the time, you could grow to like him a little bit. He's a great man, Harrison Ford. Really liked him. Enjoyed him. And I loved it because my kids were a lot younger then and it's a film they could watch. I didn't want them watching *Nil By Mouth* and *The War Zone*. But Indiana Jones is fantastic. You can watch that all day long."

Alamy, Getty Images, Mary Evans, Netflix



CUE RAGE NIL BY MOUTH 1997

"Oh, this is the pool scene where Kathy (Burke) is playing with Peter the pool player (Ronnie Fox) and I say, 'Get in the fucking car, get in the fucking car,' and she's trying to hold [his rage] back. It's a man bullying a woman, because he's insecure himself. I felt safe with Kathy (who plays the long-suffering wife of Ray's character Raymond), and hopefully she felt safe with me. It's like therapy, in a way, playing those sorts of parts, because it educates you on how you feel when you perceive those people."



DADDY ISSUES SCUM 1979

"Pongo Banks, the daddy. 'You ain't the fuckin' daddy no more.' What comes to mind is that [cinematographer] Phil Méheux was shooting this and it was done in more-or-less one take. Phil was on a handheld, following me. You go along the corridor, down the stairs and go into the pool hall where they're all fucking about. I go to the pool table, pull out the sock and put the balls into it. You see the balls going into it, but there was a geezer lying on the floor as I walk through and we swapped socks, but people think the balls are in the sock. The first time we did this was for the BBC and the second time we did it as a film and we were older. The first one was better because we were younger."



THEY CALL HIM MR GLASS THE GENTLEMEN 2024

"That's Bobby Glass, doing a bit of porridge. He's up there in his pigeon loft. I think that was shot on the back of Pinewood somewhere. I nearly worked with Guy Ritchie on *Lock, Stock, And Two Smoking Barrels*, and when he came calling, it was about time. I really enjoyed it. It's good that we're older men. When you're young, you're a bit more fiery and as you get older, you calm down."



DON & GAL SEXY BEAST 2000

[Winstone starts humming 'Peaches' by The Stranglers.] "Magnificent actor, Ben [Kingsley]. This man who played Gandhi is coming here and playing Don, and he had a certain beat in the way he spoke. 'Do it, do it, do it.' It occurred to me reading the script that the only bit of reality in the film is Gary. The rest is your nightmare. No-one fucking talks like that, but it works. If you missed an 'if' out, it didn't work. The writing was almost like modern-day fucking Shakespeare. And this scene, it would be so easy to get caught up in the rhythm of what he was doing, but I played it off his beat. I had to miss the beat."



GET YOUR COAT THE DEPARTED 2006

"I invented this character sitting with Marty (Scorsese) in the Dorchester one Sunday morning. I was up to play one of the coppers and I said, 'I don't want to, Marty.' I said, 'I'd like to play a character who was with Frank (Costello, the crime boss played by Jack Nicholson) all the time, because it's the only way you get to know who he is.' He liked that. And that's my coat. I had that on when I met Marty. I've still got it."

DAMSEL AND THE GENTLEMEN ARE ON NETFLIX NOW

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ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

MARTIN SCORSESE



- 1 What was Martin Scorsese's first film, released all the way back in 1967?
- 2 How many films has he made with Robert De Niro?
- 3 And how many films has he made with Leonardo DiCaprio?
- 4 Before *Killers Of The Flower Moon*, Scorsese directed De Niro and DiCaprio in a short film/advert for a Macau casino resort. What is the name of that short film?
- 5 We all know Johnny Boy, Travis Bickle, Rupert Pupkin, Jimmy Conway. But what's the name of De Niro's character from *New York, New York*?

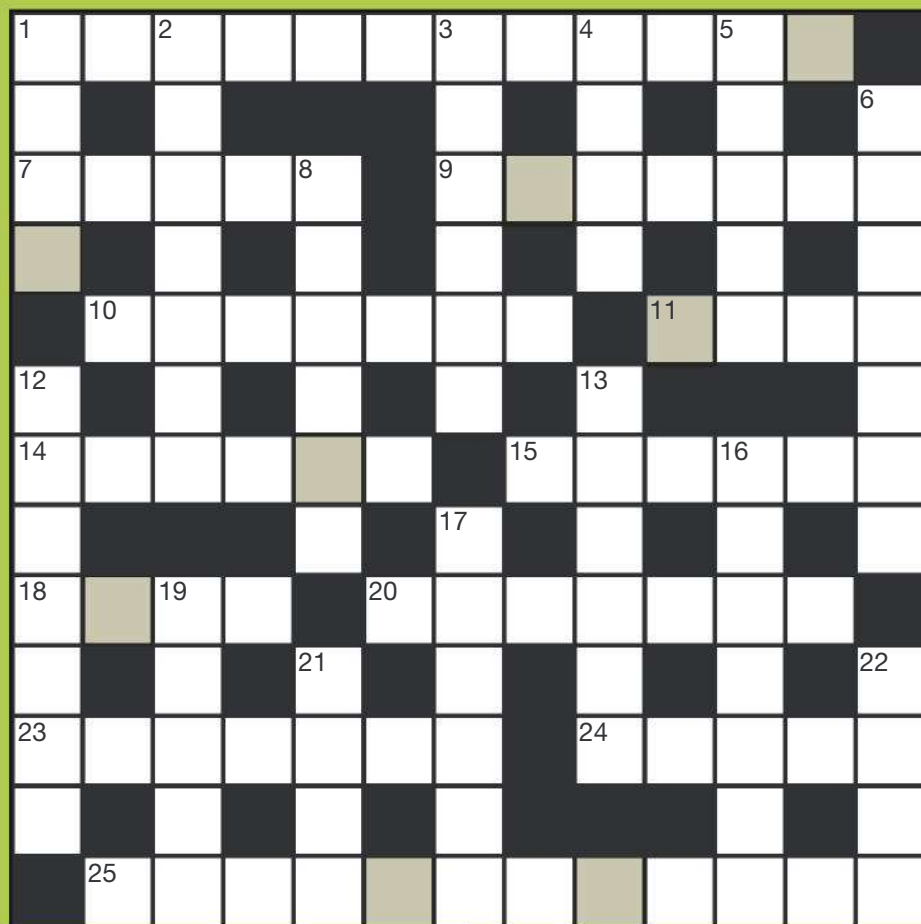


- 6 At the time of writing, he has won just one Oscar. What was it for?
- 7 But how many times has he been nominated for Best Director?
- 8 Scorsese's highest-grossing movie took in just over \$400 million worldwide. What is it?
- 9 What's the name of his production company?
- 10 Scorsese is also an excellent actor. He once starred as Vincent Van Gogh for which legendary director, and in which movie?
- 11 In which three films has Scorsese busted out the Rolling Stones' classic, 'Gimme Shelter'?
- 12 What's the name of the Henry Hill memoir upon which *GoodFellas* is based?
- 13 One person has appeared in several of Scorsese's films in roles like Rupert's Mom (*The King Of Comedy*), Tommy's Mother (*GoodFellas*) and Fruit Stand Customer (*Cape Fear*). Who is she?
- 14 What is the name of Scorsese's long-time and legendary editor?
- 15 Which Michael Jackson music video did Scorsese direct?
- 16 In *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, Willem Dafoe plays Jesus. But who plays Pontius Pilate?
- 17 In *Cape Fear*'s iconic cinema scene, what is the movie Max Cady is guffawing along to, much to the annoyance of Nick Nolte's character and his family?
- 18 What is the name of the talk-show host Rupert Pupkin becomes obsessed with in *The King Of Comedy*?
- 19 Scorsese has only directed one sequel. What is it?
- 20 "Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets" is a line from which Scorsese film?



ANSWERS 1. *Who's That Knocking At My Door* 2. Ten 3. A mere six 4. *The Audition* 5. Jimmy Doyle 6. Best Director for *The Departed* 7. Ten, including *The Departed* 8. *The Wolf Of Wall Street* 9. Sirkella Productions 10. Akira Kurosawa, in *Dreams* 11. *GoodFellas*, *Casino*, *The Departed* 12. *Wiseguy: Life In A Mafia* 13. Catherine Scorsese, Martin's mother 14. *The Hustler* 20. *Taxi Driver*

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Film company behind *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Love Actually* and *Hot Fuzz* (7,5)
 7 *Moon Knight*'s Isaac (5)
 9 It's where you meet with Judy Garland for the World's Fair (2,5)
 10 Tarantino's death-proof stuntwoman (3,4)
 11 Could be Rudolph, could be Hawke (4)
 14 Forrest Gump or Tom Courtenay's Colin Smith or a worker on a TV show (6)
 15 Sometimes see-through *Spirited Away* character who is drawn to Chihiro (2-4)
 18 His name is Lightyear! (4)
 20 It links Bubbles, Bucket and Babbitt (7)
 23 Sharon Stone's Catherine, crime-writer and prime suspect in *Basic Instinct* (7)
 24 Slytherin student — or, very briefly, James Bond's father-in-law (5)
 25 He collects spores, moulds and fungus (4,8)

DOWN

- 1 Ed, who made *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (4)
 2 Animal such as Pocahontas' pal Meeko, RJ in *Over The Hedge* or Rocket (7)
 3 She's played by Gal Gadot in *Fast & Furious* (6)
 4 *Wedding Crashers* and *Wedding Daze*'s Fisher (4)
 5/21 DOWN She's been Ellie Sattler, Lula and Holdo (5,4)
 6 Michael Caine was a great one last year (7)
 8 *Andrei* — (Andrei Tarkovsky film) (6)
 12 One who takes part in the Hunger Games (7)
 13 Cinematographer Hall who won a posthumous third Academy Award for *Road To Perdition* (6)
 16 Breslin, who's been Little Rock and a *Little Miss Sunshine* hopeful (7)
 17 *Kundun*, *Koyaanisqatsi* and *The Hours* composer Glass (6)
 19 *House Of Flying Daggers*' Yimou or Ziyi (5)
 21 See 5 DOWN
 22 How are things with Yorgos Lanthimos? (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

FOUR '80S CULT CLASSICS



DIG OUT THOSE leg-warmers and spritz that hairspray, as Final Cut Entertainment has four classic '80s titles for five winners. First up is madcap horror-comedy *Haunted Honeymoon*, starring the legendary Gene Wilder. Next, Peter Bogdanovich's moving *Mask*, with Cher and Eric Stolz as a loving mother and son. Then there's *Somewhere In Time*, a tender romantic drama starring Superman himself, Christopher Reeve. And finally Susan Seidelman's offbeat, much-loved *Desperately Seeking Susan*, with Rosanna Arquette and then-nascent-star Madonna, in a new Blu-ray set with a stack of new docs. Just crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below.

ALL TITLES ARE AVAILABLE IN STORE AND ONLINE

COMPETITION ENDS 8 APRIL

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 8 April. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

APRIL'S ANSWERS ACROSS: 2 Rear Window, 7 David, 8 Raw Deal, 9 O Brother, 10 Ryan, 12 School, 14 Leitch, 17 Hill, 18 Joel Coen, 21 Meadows, 22 Creep, 23 Adaptation. DOWN: 1 Bad Moms, 2 River, 3 Audition, 4 News, 5 Of Egypt, 6 Alan, 8 Roeg, 11 Bellucci, 13 Holland, 15 Hank Pym, 16 Gods, 17 Home, 19 Ocean, 20 Soup. **ANAGRAM** DARTH MAUL

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 9 April or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: <http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/>. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see <http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html>



CLASSIC SCENE

"IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT"

Good Will Hunting

CHOSEN BY
REINALDO MARCUS GREEN
 (DIRECTOR)

Reinaldo Marcus Green: "It's not your fault.' I cry every time. It just rips your heart out. To have someone care about you on that level, it's rare to have, because we're constantly our own worst enemy, we're constantly rejecting ourselves. Man, my heart — even talking about it, I get emotional because it's such a powerful scene. So kudos to Gus Van Sant, and Matt Damon, and Robin Williams in that scene."

INT. SEAN MAGUIRE'S OFFICE — DAY
Will Hunting (Matt Damon) is visiting his therapist, Sean Maguire (Robin Williams), for the final time. Sean is holding a folder with Will's evaluation; the report that will decide his future. Will has just asked Sean if he has had any "experience with that". Meaning childhood abuse.

Sean: My father was an alcoholic. Mean fuckin' drunk. He'd come home hammered, lookin' to whale on somebody. So I'd provoke him so he wouldn't go after my mother and little brother. Interesting nights were when he wore his rings.

Will: [Opening up] Yeah, he used to just put a, um, a wrench, a stick and a belt on the table, and just say, "Choose."

Sean: "Well, I gotta go with the belt there, Vanna."

Will: I used to go with the wrench.

Sean: Why the wrench?

Will: 'Cause fuck him, that's why.

Sean: Your foster father?

Will: Yeah. [Beat] So, uh, you know, what is it... like, "Will has an attachment disorder"? Is it all that stuff? [Sean nods] Fear of abandonment. Is that why I... Is that why I broke up with Skylar?

Sean: I didn't know you had.

Will: Yeah, I did.

Sean: You wanna talk about it?

Will: No.

Sean: [Moving towards Will] Hey, Will... I don't know a lot. But you see this? All this shit. [He puts the folder down on a table] It's not your fault.

Will: [Almost a whisper] Yeah, I know that.

Sean: Look at me, son. It's not your fault.

Will: I know.

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will: [Suddenly looking a bit scared] I know.

Sean: No, no, you don't. It's not your fault.

He moves closer. Will backs up, uncomfortable.

Will: I know.

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will: Alright.

Sean: It's not your fault. [He moves closer. Will can't look at him] It's not your fault.

Will: [Crying] Don't fuck with me.

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will lashes out at Sean, pushing him back.

Will: Don't fuck with me, alright? Don't fuck with me, Sean. Not you!

Sean won't back down. He moves back in again.

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will starts sobbing. Sean holds the back of his head, and whispers one last time.

Sean: It's not your fault.

Will breaks down, and holds Sean as he sobs.

Will: Oh, God! Oh, God, I'm so sorry! Oh, God!

The camera pulls back as Sean and Will continue to embrace.

Sean: Fuck them, okay?



LAST EXIT TO NOWHERE

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MORE POWERS, MORE PROBLEMS

EXTRAORDINARY

SEASON 2

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A person with dark hair is sitting in a dimly lit room, reading a magazine. They are wearing a dark, textured sweater and are partially covered by a dark, chunky knit blanket. A warm, yellow light from a lamp in the upper left corner illuminates the scene, casting soft shadows. The background is dark and out of focus.

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